The Eternal Tradition (*Sanatana Dharma*)

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1

Contents

Note on New Edition

Hinduism, the Eternal Tradition (Sanatana Dharma) , was first published in 1995 as an attempt to explain the universal basis of Hindu Dharma. Since then, the book has undergone several printings in India and has been ordered in bulk by Hindu groups in North America, the United Kingdom, and India. I have been surprised at the enduring interest the book has received, particularly since it has had no advertising or promotion to make people aware of it.

Many enthusiastic readers have asked me to do a new edition of the book, as much has changed globally in the interim, and the subject is so large that many enhancements can be made. This has led to the following revision, which has occurred on two levels. First, I have rewritten much of the original material in the book to improve the presentation and clarify the meaning. Second, I have included additional material and new topics to make the book more complete and up to date. Note that I have removed a few topics and sections from the old edition that I felt were no longer timely or important.

Since the first edition of this book, three important teachers of Hindu Dharma have passed away: Ram Swarup and Sitaram Goel of Voice of India and Sivaya Subramuniyya Swami of Hinduism Today magazine. According to Hindu Dharma, there is no death, so these great souls have moved on to a greater reality from which we can still communicate with them. All three had a strong impact on my thought and are central to the Hindu awakening in the world today.

Ram Swarupís studies of Hinduism were crucial for the present book and he kindly allowed me to use his Great Refuge in the appendix.

Two other important teachers of mine passed away as well. The first was Dr. B. L. Vashta who besides being my primary teacher of Ayurvedic medicine, brought me into the fold of Hindu thought and guided me along the way for many years. Second was Dr. B. V. Raman, who was not only a great astrologer, but a great Hindu mind who encouraged many people, both East and West, in Vedic studies, including myself.

Many Hindu groups have been important to the causes of this book: the Hindu Voice of UK, the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, the Hindu Mahasabha of Trinidad, and the Swaminarayan Organization

(BAPS). As for current Hindu teachers, Swami Dayananda of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and Sivananda Murty of Andhra Pradesh have been the most important. Above all, I must acknowledge the great teachers of India from the ancient Vedic rishis to modern gurus and the great Deities who have manifested through them.

This book is meant to encourage deeper thought and inquiry. If it succeeds in this regard, its purpose has been fulfilled, even if the reader may come to different conclusions. Compared to the Eternal Dharma, we as individuals are but dust and must always look deeper to understand its profound and many sided message.

We all arise from the Eternal, live within it and return to it as our ultimate abode. May all beings attain their inherent everlasting peace and bliss! This is the gift of Sanatana Dharma.

January 2008 Dr. David Frawley (Pandit Vamadeva Shastri)

Authorís Introduction

Today there is a new seeking for a universal spirituality above and beyond the limitations of organized religion. To meet the challenge of the global culture dawning around us, we must create planetary spiritual tradition that preserves the best in religion while leaving aside what is limited and causes conflict. Yet the idea of a universal tradition of spiritual knowledge beyond all religious dogma is not new. It is the basis of the oldest and most diverse of the worldís great religions, Hinduism, whose original name is Sanatana Dharma, ìthe eternal tradition of Truth.î

To develop such a universal tradition, it is important that we examine its already existent formulations which, though perhaps distorted by time, still contain a solid foundation on which to build. Hinduism with its more than five thousand years of continuous spiritual and yogic teachings provides such a basis that so far has not properly been examined.

The unfortunate tendency has been to look at Hinduism through the blinders of more dogmatic and less experiential belief systems that formulate themselves in an exclusivist manner. That Hinduism is often found wanting according to the vision of those trained in differently formulated religious traditions may not be a reflection of the nature of Hinduism itself but of the inaccurate perspectives from which it is examined. Here we will attempt a view of Hinduism that looks at religion in a universal and eternal light, not as something limited to a particular belief, community or historical revelation, but as a science of consciousness.

Though born in the West, I have been fortunate to have personally experienced the universal basis of the Hindu tradition. I have tried to explain several facets of Hindu thought, including Yoga, Vedanta and Ayurveda, in various books that I have written. This experience has compelled me to write a special volume expressing the discovery of Hindu Dharma that has provided the inspiration for my other writings.

My personal search for a comprehensive spiritual science led me to Hindu-based teachings, which culminated in an encounter with the universal view, Sanatana Dharma, behind these. As few people today ó including the great majority of Hindus ó understand the background of this complex religion and culture, I have tried to present that in a contemporary idiom, so that others might share in the discovery.

I am not writing about Hinduism from an academic perspective which, however interesting, is a second hand view. The academic approach is not the view of the artist but the art critic. It is not the view of the practitioner at work in the field but the critic peering in the distance, often with his own agenda. Hinduism affords endless ground for academic investigation, which may have its own value,

but such an approach will not provide a first hand understanding of this vast tradition that antedates by many centuries the views and ideas with which it is usually judged. Such intellectual study is at best introductory or peripheral and seldom of direct relevance for those who want to reach the core of the Hindu mind and its living reality.

I am writing about Hinduism as an individual born in the West who has not only immersed himself in the Hindu tradition, but has discovered that tradition at the core of his own being, not as a novel identity but as part of oneís true Self that transcends birth and death. I am not writing about Hinduism simply as a particular religion relevant to its own members, but about the universal culture behind Hinduism, which can be important for everyone. This book is not about the concerns only people of one specific faith but about the primary issues that we all must come to grips with if we want to know the higher truth.

Many Hindus, both in India and the West, have requested me to write a book expressing their tradition to the modern mind. They have told me that the inner truth of Hinduism spoken by a westerner is more likely to be taken seriously even by Hindus, than the same truth expressed by a native born Hindu. This does appear to be a fact in the modern age in which everything western is looked upon as better in eastern countries, even spirituality that has historically been better developed in the East than in the West.

Hindu friends in India requested such a book for the sake of western educated Hindus among whom it is fashionable to denigrate their own tradition without having really examined it. Hindu friends in the United States requested it for their children, particularly those in college, to help them appreciate and preserve their heritage in a society that often has little regard for it, much less any real understanding of it.

Fortunately, I have been able to meet with people in India from all backgrounds, including swamis, yogis, traditional Brahmin priests, Hindu social activists and political leaders, Ayurvedic doctors, Vedic astrologers, Hindu musicians, and modern westernized Hindus of all types, including businessmen, writers and journalists extending to the Marxist journalists in the country. India contains probably a greater diversity of points of view, spiritually, intellectually and politically than any country in the world, as it has all the views of the modern West along with those of its own ancient teachings extending back thousands of years.

I have made it a point to study the Hindu tradition from its Vedic and Puranic roots including the Vedas, Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, and Tantra, examining the original Sanskrit texts and having discussions with traditional teachers. In this process, I soon discovered that a tremendous gap exists between how the Hindu tradition formulates itself and how it is presented in the modern world. What we in the West generally think characterizes Hinduism is often inaccurate, prejudiced and frequently contrary to its real teachings.

To counter the many distortions about Hinduism, this book offers what could be called an ìinside the tradition viewî of Hinduism, attempting to portray the higher side of Hinduism that has sustained it throughout the ages, while many other religions have come and gone. The book is an attempt to reveal Hindu Dharma in its greater beauty, profundity and relevance. Such an inside view naturally differs greatly from the usual ìoutside the tradition views,î which is all that most people have encountered in their education today.

In this regard, we should remember that inside the tradition views are easy to find relative to Christianity, and for Judaism and Islam as well. They are not regarded as biased but as representing these traditions directly and in an authentic manner. It seems only relative to the Hindu tradition that the West (and even modern Indians) insist should only be presented by its critics and detractors.

Therefore, an inside the tradition view of Hinduism is important to create balance in how the subject is presented, though has its own value as well.

If there were only outside the tradition views available on Christianity, for example, presenting it according to images of the crusades, inquisition, witch burning, slavery and the colonial genocide of native peoples, Christianity could be made to look very gruesome, not the religion of love that its followers regard it as. If Islam were presented only according to the impressions created by Islamic terrorism and the records of the peoples it conquered, one can also imagine how negative it might look.

The Hindu tradition is usually looked upon according to social evils in Indian society, especially the caste system, though caste by birth is not universal to Hindu thought or practice and is a distortion of earlier Hindu social orders. At the same time, Christianity and Islam are seldom judged according to the inequalities in their societies whether of the medieval period or those continuing today, though this was done more commonly in the past. Meanwhile, Hinduismís great Vedantic philosophy, deep yoga practices and towering modern gurus, are usually ignored in academic studies. For those who may claim that my view is slanted in favor of Hinduism, I ask them to take it as a counterweight for the many more books slanted against it.

Naturally, much of this vast tradition cannot be dealt with in a single volume. The book does not attempt to discuss all the teachings of Hinduism, its different branches, teachers, and scriptures. It is aimed at understanding the Hindu view of the universe and the orientation of the Hindu mind. It is meant to address the thoughts and questions that people may have in trying to understand what is behind the Hindu tradition in all of its many dimensions.

The book consists of a series of reflections in the first section, and questions and answers in the second, addressing Sanatana Dharma, the universal tradition behind Hinduism and the yogic spirituality that derives from it. It portrays Hinduism as both a universal approach and as a well-defined tradition with a complete spiritual science and culture of its own. The book is not about Hinduism as a mere religious belief, though it does address the differences that Hinduism may have with other religions. It is meant to present Hinduism in its inner light, which is as a spiritual art and science designed to connect us to our original nature as pure consciousness, the Atman of Vedantic philosophy. Note that the translations of Vedic verses at the beginning of each chapter are those of the author only.

I have written this book as one who is Hindu in religion not by birth but by inner affinity. I am not afraid to identify myself with the Hindu tradition, though some people may think it is politically incorrect and socially backward, particularly for a westerner to call himself a Hindu. On the contrary, I think that being part of the Hindu tradition is the most progressive spiritual association that one can make, understanding its great teachings and connection with the cosmic mind that is perhaps unparalleled in human culture.

This yogic universalism of Hinduism is not a superficial unity of accepting all religions as they are today as true but one that provides an appropriate place for each aspect of life and every form of spiritual practice. In this regard, Hinduism may reflect the religion of the future, reflecting a time after we have moved beyond all dogmas to a greater art and science of Selfrealization. It is possible that the encounter of the West with Hinduism will eventually transform western religious and spiritual systems into aspects of Sanatana Dharma, coming together under the umbrella of the type of universal view that we find within Hinduism. Hinduism can provide the basis for real world religion or planetary dharma, not by converting people to a new belief but by incorporating all religion, arts and sciences into a higher understanding in which experiential spirituality at an individual level replaces

mere religious belief at the level of the masses.

Let us examine humanityís oldest and most enduring spiritual tradition, which of the religions of the world can perhaps most rightfully can call itself ìthe Eternal Tradition,î in order to help understand our own deeper spiritual potential. The eternal teaching begins and ends with the Self, the revelation of our true Being, which is pure consciousness, freedom, bliss and immortality beyond time and space, birth and death, suffering and limitation.

May all beings come to recognize that Supreme Self! May all cultures come to build their societies upon It! David Frawley (Pandit Vamadeva Shastri)

Important Facts about Hinduism

! Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world today with around one billion members worldwide.

! Hinduism is the largest of the non-biblical religious traditions, with only Christianity and Islam having more formal adherents.

! Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world with its roots going back over five thousand years to the dawn of history.

! Given its antiquity and extent, Hinduism has probably been practiced by the largest number of human beings throughout the course of history.

! Hinduism is the largest pluralistic religion in the world, accepting many ways to God or truth, many great teachers and many scriptures, known and unknown.

! Hinduism is the largest experiential spiritual tradition in the world, defining religion in terms of inner practices of Yoga and meditation, not in terms of outer terms of faith, belief or label.

! Hinduism is the largest and oldest religion that teaches the law of karma and reincarnation, which many people and a number of spiritual traditions all over the world also accept.

! Hinduism contains a full system of yogic knowledge including an understanding of the higher worlds, the chakras and levels of consciousness extending to the Absolute beyond time and space, along with practical methods of asana, pranayama, mantra and meditation for experiencing these.

Important facts about Hinduism

! Hinduism has the largest set of spiritual philosophies in the world through its many schools of Vedanta, Yoga, Samkhya, Mimamsa, Nyaya, Vaisheshika and Tantra. There is little in any of the philosophies and theologies of the world that the Hindu mind has not addressed and integrated into a higher way of Self-realization.

! Hinduism is a spiritual science that has no conflict with modern science and similarly accepts the evolution life, including an evolution of consciousness, and an antiquity of the universe going back many billions of years, as well as many cycles of creation throughout eternity.

! Hinduism contains a complete sacred or spiritual art and science including medicine, astrology, architecture, music, dance, literature and grammar, as well as a wide variety of yogic, occult and spiritual disciplines.

! Hinduism is based upon the Sanskrit language, which is probably the most scientific and spiritual of all languages, containing the most in depth understanding of mantra and sacred sound.

! Hinduism has the most complete and comprehensive science of ritual of any religion with its elaborate pujas, yajnas and havans, using numerous priests and mantras, and offerings from the entire world of nature.

! Hinduism has more Divine incarnations (avatars), gurus, rishis, yogis, sages and seers than any

other religion, not relying on any single prophet, savior or enlightened one for its representation.

! Hinduism has more names and forms for the Divine than any other religion, finding the Divine not only in human forms, but also in animals, plants, rocks and all of nature, as well as in subtle worlds not known to our ordinary senses.

! Hinduism is the largest of the nature based religions in the world, finding the Divine both in nature and beyond, recognizing everything as sacred, and all creatures as part of our own greater Self.

! Hinduism is the largest of the native and indigenous religions in the world, with its roots in nature and the land, not in a mere book or historical revelation.

! Hinduism has the largest religious gatherings and festivals in the world, with over thirty million people attending the last Kumbha Mela alone.

! Hinduism has more monks and renunciates than any other religion today with over two million in India today. Yet it also has a householder tradition that is equally old and respected, with many great teachers from this approach as well.

! Hinduism has more holy places than any other major religion, finding sacred sites everywhere in nature, from the shores of ocean to the highest mountain peaks.

! Hinduism has more holy days than any other religion, with special holy days every month and seasonal festivals lasting up to ten days in length.

! Hinduism does not have any single founder or any specific time of origination. It is not based upon any particular personality or historical event. Hinduism is said to be inherent in the cosmic mind and arises anew with every cycle of creation. It is impersonal and eternal relative to its teachings but also honors the Divine as manifest through many great personalities.

! As such, the correct and traditional name for Hinduism is ìSanatana Dharmaî, the Eternal Tradition. It belongs to all beings, not simply to all people but to the entire universe.

Part I
THE UNIVERSAL DHARMA

Truth alone wins, not untruth. By Truth is established the path that leads to the Divine, by which the seers, who have fulfilled their desires, reach to the Supreme abode of Truth.
Mundaka Upanishad III.1.6
Self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge. Upanishads
There is no attainment higher than Self-knowledge. Shankaracharya, Upadesha Sahasri II.17.4

1.1 The Search for a Universal and Eternal Tradition

Human Aspiration for the Eternal

Throughout history, wise and discriminating individuals from all lands have sought a truth that is universal and eternal. This has been a quest not only of philosophers and mystics but of all of us in our deeper moments, as we all want to know the real nature of existence. Deep inside ourselves, we long for an absolute truth through which we can permanently transcend suffering and death and gain everlasting bliss and immortality. Many great thinkers, looking beyond the names and forms of historical religions and philosophies, have envisioned an enduring tradition of inner knowledge that reflects this universal truth and allows people to access it without any external boundaries to limit their search.

Truth, in the higher sense, is that which is eternal and unchanging. It remains the same for all times and for all people. It is not a fad or opinion of the moment, but the very ground of existence. Truth is

not something that exists at one place only but can be found everywhere, if one knows how to look. Such an eternal truth must maintain an ongoing presence in society for civilization to have any real meaning.

The quest for universal truth, and a tradition to sustain it, is not merely a spiritual search, it is the essence of all knowledge. In any field of knowledge we are seeking to understand universal laws, which like the law of gravity are common to all human beings regardless of their background. Science formulates itself as an understanding of universal physical laws. Art portrays the underlying creative forces behind the universe.

All religions have some sense of the eternal within them, however imperfectly this may be formulated or expressed. After all, religion is the field of life meant to address the spiritual reality behind the universe, which is not limited by time or space. The attempt to connect human beings with the eternal is the essence of true religion. Yet, as they have been institutionalized, religions generally remain bound to a particular leader, book, or church as the ultimate, which tends to remove them from universality and consign them into partiality.

Religion has too often been turned into dogma and authority, a vested interest in the outer world in which the discovery of truth at an individual is set aside. Such a reduction of the spiritual to particular time-space coordinates is the denial of any transcendent reality. However, this beliefbased view of religion is easier for the human mind to appreciate as it looks for quick and convenient answers to lifeís deep problems. It is also easier for society to regulate and so has remained dominant historically, particularly in the western world.

Because of this tendency of organized religion to become a social control mechanism rather than a real spiritual path; serious individuals have looked beyond it to mystical and yogic teachings to reach the higher truth. For this reason, the seeking of universal truth has been as much beyond religion as through religion. The inner search has taken often western people in the direction of eastern religions, which are more experientially based, less dogmatic and offer more individual freedom of approach.

The Universal Tradition and the Synthesis of Religions

In the current global age, in which the different cultures of the world are in direct communication, there is a new movement towards a universal spirituality. This has led to an effort to create a universal tradition by combining the religions of the world into global or planetary religion that encompasses all religions and affords each an honored place. Many Hindu teachers and thinkers from India have had such ideas. This seeking for the unity of worldís main religious traditions is a valuable endeavor and can provide much insight. It is an important factor in interfaith dialogue. However, it is not without its limitations.

We must recognize that what is originally formulated in a fragmentary manner cannot easily lead to wholeness. We cannot create the universal through putting together particulars. We cannot create the unity of a tree through gathering together its various leaves which have fallen on the ground. We must return to the original root in order to do so.

By validating limited approaches in the religious realm, along with their vested interests, there is the danger that we may emphasize differences and strengthen divisions. It can be compared to seeking to create unity in humanity by validating all the different borders that exist between nations as fair boundaries. True unity occurs when we set aside outer differences and recognize the essence of consciousness as our true nature, in which all external distinctions lose their significance. It manifests when we emphasize the universal Self within us and put outer religious differences in the background.

More important than accepting all religions as they are, we should recognize what is universal in religion, which is the search for a higher awareness, not any outer forms or beliefs. True unity is self-

existent at the core of who we really are. It cannot be fabricated by emphasizing differences that exist only at the surface. The oneness of the ocean exists at its depths, not at the level of the waves, which must remain ever changing. A universal tradition rests not upon existing institutions but on the aspiration of the individual, which transcends the forms that society has developed to either help or to control that aspiration.

There are other thinkers today who want to create a universal tradition by discarding the existent religions of the world, recognizing that these have become limiting identities. This approach has the advantage of avoiding the baggage that religions have accumulated historically. Yet it would be like trying to create a new science by discarding all that science has previously discovered. Instead, we should embrace what is universal in the religious and spiritual teachings of the world, neither validating them superficially, nor discarding what they may have to offer in an effort to create a clean slate.

The Universal Tradition and the Hindu Religion

This seeking of a universal spiritual truth has not everywhere remained an isolated phenomenon, nor is it something of the modern age only. There is at least one major world religion that has always formulated itself as a manysided universal tradition, encompassing all the ways of knowledge and leading all souls to Self-realization and union with the Supreme ñ in short encompassing all that we know of as religion and spirituality without seeking to limit it to a particularly name, form, personality or institution.

This is the religion that we know of as Hinduism, whose correct name is *Sanatana Dharma*, ìthe universal or eternal tradition.î Hinduism does not rest upon any single formation or particular belief system but remains open to all approaches to the higher truth, through a variety of spiritual teachers and practices going back to the beginning of history.

On an inner level, Hinduism defines itself through Selfknowledge, not through a personality, book, institution or heavenly goal. This is the basis of the philosophy of Vedanta, the summit (anta) of spiritual knowledge or wisdom (Veda), which explains clearly and comprehensively what our true nature is beyond all time and space. As the higher aspect of the Vedic teaching, Vedanta remains relevant to everyone, including those who may find the outer forms of Hinduism difficult to understand. Vedanta is the basis of both a perennial philosophy and an eternal path of spiritual realization that answers all the questions of life and shows us a way beyond all sorrow.

The Hindu tradition, particularly in its Vedantic expression, has always reflected a universal tradition of inner knowledge. Vedanta provides a good foundation for a global formulation of perennial wisdom, such as many modern Vedantins going back to Swami Vivekananda have already indicated. However, the outer aspects of Hinduism add to Vedanta a culture, way of life and, most importantly, sacred arts and sciences that can bring this inner vision into all that we do. These outer aspects of Sanatana Dharma need not be discarded as irrelevant, though we can choose other outer forms as well if we find something more meaningful to support our inner quest.

This is not to say that Hinduism or even Vedanta is the sole representative of any universal tradition. A universal tradition cannot be owned by anyone or reduced to any region of the globe. The beauty of Hinduism is that it is a religion that it allows a universal perspective to flow through it. Hinduism is a tradition of spiritual search without barriers that accepts all true aspiration regardless of name or form. It places experiential spirituality at an individual level above outer beliefs, rituals or creeds.

It also does not mean that everything we see in Hinduism today is universal. Any formulation of a universal teaching, being bound by time and place, must contain elements which are particular. It must

contain teachings relative to particular peoples, places and cultures, which may not be relevant to others. Though truth is universal, there is always a local aspect in its expression. In addition, Hinduism, at least in some of its existing strands, contains unnecessary accretions that require purification so that its universal essence can be made evident to all.

However, in spite of such outer limitations, the universal foundation in Hinduism remains intact at its core. In fact, the universal aspect of Hinduism is currently experiencing resurgence throughout the world. It is in the process of reclaiming its global relevance as the many modern spiritual masters from India continue to demonstrate. It is important, therefore, for all students of religion and for all spiritual seekers to take a deeper look at humanityís oldest religion and arguably, its most concerned about spirituality as inner realization.

The Conscious Being alone is all this, what has been and what will be.
Rig Veda X.90.2

All this universe is Brahman. The Self of all beings is Brahman. Mandukya Upanishad I.2

He who sees the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self, henceforth has no more remorse.
Isha Upanishad

Hatred never ends by hatred but only by love, that is the eternal law (Sanatana Dharma).
Buddha, Dhammapada I.5

1.2 Sanatana Dharma: Hinduism in a Universal Light

The Himalayan Tradition

The Himalayas are the worldís highest mountains, extending fifteen hundred miles across the north of India with thousands of massive snow peaks towering well over twenty thousand feet. These great mountains are the source of the largest river systems in the world: the great rivers of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Indus, Amu Darya, Yangtze and Mekong, which feed Asia, the worldís largest continent. Looking at the Himalayas from the standpoint of sacred geography - which conceives the entire planet as a single being - we could say that these mountains at the roof of the world represent the crown chakra or head center of the planet. We would, therefore, expect powerful spiritual energies to consistently emanate from them.

Not surprisingly, from these lofty peaks has come the oldest and probably most comprehensive spiritual tradition in the world - the teachings of the great yogis, rishis and sages who have lived in this region since time immemorial. From the Himalayas, this yogic teaching has spread to many lands and centers throughout the world, particularly in India, which lodged beneath the Himalayas to the tropical south receives the greatest portion of the mountain waters through its sacred rivers.

This Himalayan tradition, perhaps because of its very depth, richness and diversity, has seldom been understood as a whole. The largest part of the tradition - what has been called Hinduism by the proximity of the Himalayas to India - remains probably the most enigmatic and misunderstood of all the worldís major religions, largely because it is not a religion in the Western sense of the term as a belief system, but a spiritual path wedded to the whole of life and nature.

Because of the misconceptions associated with the term Hindu ó which suggests an ethnic religion rather than a universal teaching ó this Himalayan spiritual tradition has been propagated in the modern world mainly under the name of ìYoga.î Yoga, which means union, is the main practice of the Himalayan tradition, which aims at guiding us to our own inner realization, an inner unity with the Divine, not simply subordinating us to an outer religious identity. This it does through teaching us how to use asanas, pranayama, mantra and meditation for our own direct experience of the Divine.

Vedanta is another term for the Himalayan tradition because Vedanta represents the oneness of the

individual soul with the universal being, the inner unity that Yoga is aiming at. The original teachers who brought Yoga to the West like Vivekananda, Yogananda and the many disciples of Swami Shivananda of Rishikesh, always spoke of Yoga-Vedanta for this reason.

The term ìVedic knowledgeî is also used for this wonderful tradition. Veda, which means spiritual knowledge, indicates the full range of spiritual, occult and sacred sciences, as originally set forth in the profound mantras of the ancient Vedic texts more than five thousand years ago.

Such spiritual terms as Yoga, Veda and Vedanta better communicate the essence of this nameless tradition to the modern mind than does the limited designation Hindu. However, they can also give the misimpression that Hindu culture and spirituality is something different or not relevant, when it is a broader and more outward expression of the same essence.

Sanatana Dharma and Yoga

The original name for this Himalayan based Yoga tradition is ìSanatana Dharma,î which means the ìeternal or universal truth.î Sanatana Dharma is a tradition conceived of as inherent in the cosmic mind, arising with the dawn of creation itself. It is a set of teachings that comprehends all of life, including religion, yoga, mysticism, philosophy, science, art and culture as part of a single reality.

The term dharma itself has been introduced worldwide in recent decades, not only relative to Hindu teachings but in regard to Buddhism, whose original name is Buddha Dharma. An understanding of dharma, which more specifically means ìnatural law,î is crucial to the greater Himalayan tradition. Hinduism is sometimes called ìHindu Dharmaî in order to discriminate it from a religion in the western sense of the word.

Yoga as the practical side of Sanatana Dharma contains a physical aspect, the science of asanas or yogic postures, which has been easy for physically oriented western culture to relate to. Yet while the term Yoga can be helpful in communicating aspects of Sanatana Dharma without confusing it with a religious dogma, it has limitations and can cause misconceptions.

Traditional or classical Yoga refers to the spiritual practice of Sanatana Dharma as and emphasizes devotion, meditation and introspection to develop a higher awareness within us. Modern Yoga, on the other hand, is identified with Yoga postures as a physical fitness system in which the spiritual component is secondary. Even traditional Hatha Yoga, which is characteristically a Yoga of personal effort, was originally used to purify the body for the pursuit of higher states of consciousness. The practice of Yoga asanas is not an end-initself, nor does it stand apart from the yogic science of meditation. Its true goal is Self-realization, not merely health or flexibility which only of secondary value.

Having been exposed to Yoga teachings for over a century, it is important that western students are introduced into the greater spiritual and cultural tradition from which Yoga derives. This includes Vedic arts and science like Ayurveda (Vedic medicine), Vedic astrology (Jyotisha), Vastu (Vedic architecture), Indian music and dance, Vedantic philosophy and, above all, the greater yogic paths of Knowledge (J¤ana Yoga), Devotion (Bhakti Yoga), Service (Karma Yoga) and Psycho-physical techniques (Raja Yoga). It is equally important that Hindus look behind the outer forms and rituals of their religion to its yogic and Vedantic basis that has value for all.

We could call the greater tradition of Sanatana Dharma as ëyogic cultureí or ëyogic scienceí. The same physical movements that appear in Yoga postures occur in Indian dance. The same philosophy behind Yoga forms the background of Ayurvedic medicine. The study of the Sanskrit language, which mirrors cosmic sound, is itself a path of Yoga. Meditation is a way of bringing peace and equipoise to the mind, just as yogic postures serve to do so to the physical body. Mantras are like asanas or yoga postures for the mind, allowing it to hold specific patterns of mental energy.

Hinduism in a Yogic Light

Unfortunately, the term Sanatana Dharma is unfamiliar and complex, and lacks recognition, particularly in the West. If one looks for the teachings of Sanatana Dharma in libraries and bookstores, these will mainly be found under Hinduism instead. *This means that we cannot dismiss the term Hindu, even recognizing its limitations. We must expand its meaning back to its essence as Sanatana Dharma.* This will take some time, reflection and a reorientation of the global mind. To facilitate it, we must first restore the connection of Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma, so that we always think of the two together.

In this regard, some Hindus object to the name Hinduism for their religion because Hindu Dharma is not an ëismí or ideology but a way of life. When they may say that they are ënot Hindusí, they are not rejecting Sanatana Dharma or their own traditions, but trying to find a better terminology to express it, a fact that many westerners may also not understand.

Hinduism reflects a universal yogic tradition at its core. Even what appear to be extraneous aspects of Hindu culture like depictions of deities or temple designs ó are based upon an understanding of nature and are not arbitrary rules or local customs. Those who wish to understand the greater teachings of Yoga should examine Hinduism, not simply as a religion, but as a complete spiritual culture. This requires not merely performing yogic postures but establishing a yogic life-style, both individually and collectively, and looking into the yogic aspects of philosophy, art, science and medicine.

Many people throughout the world have adopted Hindu teachings like Yoga, Vedanta, or Ayurvedic medicine. They follow guru-lines originating from India, if not teachers who were born in the country. A number have taken Sanskrit names, which they refer to as their spiritual names. Yet few would formally call themselves Hindus. Some would be opposed to the appellation, considering it to be a foreign or restrictive religious identity. Yet if one explains the concept of Sanatana Dharma to them, most would regard themselves as followers of such a universal tradition.

Hindu as a particular ethnic type born in India, believing in caste and untouchability, economically, socially and intellectually backward ó which is how this religion has been generally presented to the modern mind ó is a narrow and unappealing concept for anyone. On the other hand, Sanatana Dharma ó the idea of an eternal and universal tradition of Self-realization and higher consciousness ó represents the deepest aspirations and perceptions of the human heart, which all inwardly aware people must recognize.

As a formulation of Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition, Hinduism is not limited to any single messiah, prophet, scripture, or church. It is not restricted to a particular community or looking toward any specific historical end or goal. It contains numerous teachings and revelations, and is ever being reformulated in light of the experience of living Self-realized teachers. It embraces all aspiration toward the Divine or Supreme Being by all creatures, not only human beings but plants, animals and the inhabitants, godly or ungodly, of subtle worlds beyond our physical senses. It maintains a connection to all worlds and all times, to the ancient past and the distant future in the vision of an unbounded self-renewing reality (Brahman).

Sanatana Dharma is a way of knowledge without limits, yet it does possess unchanging principles. It recognizes the great laws of nature and consciousness, like the law of karma ó a clear connection of cause and effect in our actions, not only in the present life but relative to past and future lives. It respects the cosmic intelligence working through nature and seeks to harmonize human life with the universal energy. For this purpose, Sanatana Dharma encourages us to honor and worship the Divine principles (Gods or Devatas) working through the forces of nature, including Mother Earth, making

regular offerings and prayers to these living powers of cosmic consciousness. Its deities are universal forces, not theological assertions.

Sanatana Dharma is a practical way of knowledge, not a theoretical system or ideology that can be embraced on a conceptual or emotional level alone. It aims at providing us with the appropriate tools to discover the higher truth for ourselves, rather than telling us what truth is supposed to be. Such practices are diverse and cannot be limited to one set formulation or standardized approach. They include yogic postures, breathing exercises, ritual, mantra and meditation. Sanatana Dharma also teaches us the ethical disciplines necessary to use these spiritual tools correctly, like the attitudes of non-violence (ahimsa) and truthfulness. It directs us toward spiritual realization as the real goal of our lives.

Hinduism and Religion

Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma is like a great mother and the other religions are like her children. Like a mother, she does not like to criticize her children but prefers to nourish and support them. Through her, we can understand the ground from which all religions spring, which is also their ultimate goal.

Hinduism as a universal tradition contains the greatest diversity and freedom in the spiritual life that can be found in any of the religions on the planet. It allows the Divine to be worshipped in any name or form, or beyond name and form. It allows us to see God as father, mother, brother, sister, friend or master, and ultimately requires that we see God as everything and, above all, as our very own Self. It says that whatever leads us to our deeper Self, which is the true Divinity, is good, regardless of the form that it takes, which is a matter of personal approach only.

Yet Hinduism, perhaps alone of the worldís major religions, has yet to define itself to the modern mind. Even Hindus with a modern western education usually do not understand their own tradition and cannot explain it to others. Though its teachings have been set forth, often quite clearly, by many great teachers since Vivekananda, their vastness and diversity has caused the underlying tradition to become obscured by the very luxuriance of its growths.

Most of us with a little reading can define the main principles and beliefs of Christianity, Islam, Judaism or Buddhism. We can study the life of Christ, Mohammed, Moses or Buddha as a model for the religion as a whole. But how

s many of us, even those who may have studied Yoga and Vedanta can define the essence of Hinduism? How many of us are aware of its true nature as Sanatana Dharma or the universal Dharma? How many of those born as Hindus know the roots of their own tradition? The very beauty of Hinduism is that it cannot be defined in a simplistic manner. It contains all the mystery and complexity of life itself.

Hinduism and Colonial Shadows

To approach Hinduism and recognize how we have failed to understand its true nature; we must first examine the history of Hinduism, particularly over the last thousand years. India was under British colonial rule for about two hundred years (1757 - 1947), during which time period the Hindu tradition was undermined and denigrated and strong efforts were made to convert the country to Christianity. Hindu religious schools and institutions were frowned upon, if not closed down by the British. British sponsored colonial studies of the teachings and scriptures of Hinduism, which not surprisingly portrayed the religion as primitive, were introduced into the educational system of India as authoritative. Indiaís great gurus were ignored, though a few westerners bravely became their disciples.

Prior to the British period, for more than five hundred years, most of India was under Islamic

rule, which was also largely colonial in nature. India faced several waves of Islamic invaders starting from the eighth century that gradually made inroads into the country and resulted in the destruction of thousands of temples. During this long assault, Hinduism was often actively suppressed and rarely encouraged. Hindus were frequently prevented from practicing their religion in public and forceful attempts were made to convert them, which under more aggressive Islamic rulers like Aurangzeb resulted in one of the worst genocides in the history of the human race. Even in times of general peace, economic pressure was applied to Hindus through an Islamic religious tax (the jizzia tax). It is a wonder that Hinduism even survived, particularly when the older religions of Iran and Central Asia could not withstand the same onslaught for a much shorter period.

The result of these aggressive attempts to convert Hindus was that Hinduism went underground and became contracted within itself, like a bird in a cage. Hindu Dharma withdrew from its universal orientation into a survival mode. Hindus became reluctant to express their religion, much less to share it with others for fear of criticism or attack. This history of oppression is the basis of the self-enclosed appearance of Hinduism that many non-Hindus feel when they talk to Hindus about religion, not the true nature of the religion or its deeper teachings.

This British system of education and that of the Catholic Church, which could not be called sensitive to Hinduism, still dominates India today. Not surprisingly, how we see Hinduism has been colored by the views of missionaries and colonialists who were trying to convert or rule India, and were certainly not appreciative of its ancient spiritual culture. The ideas of Hindus as polytheists, idolaters, and devil worshippers are missionary stereotypes, deriving from those whose motivation is not to understand this profound religion but to discredit it. Such people never sincerely studied with the great sages of India, seeking to learn Yoga and meditation under them. They cast Hinduism in the same negative light as they did the religions of the Native Americans, the Chinese and other non-white peoples, rejecting it only because it was different than their own. How many of us would go to Christian missionaries to learn about Islam or Buddhism? Yet many of the scholars we look to for a definition of Hinduism or its ancient *Vedas*, starting with nineteenth century figures like Max Muller, Ralph Griffith, and Monier Williams were often consciously trying to undermine it and say so in their own writings.

On top of these colonial denigrations, modern India has a strong Marxist and communist element, particularly conspicuous in the universities and in the media, which could not be regarded as appreciative of Hinduism either. Indiaís Communists still rule the state of Bengal and honor not only Marx and Lenin but even Stalin and Mao that other communist parties in the world have rejected. The result is that the view of Hinduism taught in India today is highly influenced by Marxism, and often about as sensitive towards Hinduism as the Marxist interpretation of the Bible is towards Christianity. Western media and academia often repeat the anti-Hindu stories of Indiaís Marxist left, not realizing the degree of political bias behind these.

If we examine how religions are taught in the United States today, we find that Biblical religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam are frequently presented by authors and teachers who are part of their tradition, who practice it and are clearly promoting a favorable view of it. If one looks at departments of Hindu studies, however, should they exist at all, one finds that these are often run by non-Hindus, Christians, Marxists and others who would never consider themselves an ally of Hinduism. Some are run by scholars who use Freudian psychology to interpret Hinduism, something that was once done relative to Biblical religions but has long since been rejected as inappropriate for these religions. It is only relative to Hinduism that such psychological debunking of a religion remains main stream in its interpretation in the West.

Contemporary Hindu gurus and their teachings are rarely recognized in modern studies of Hinduism, except perhaps in a derogatory manner as cult leaders! Hinduism as a religion is mainly looked at according to ancient texts that few Hindus study and use today, particularly social law codes from many centuries ago, as if Hinduism was a fossil from a previous era. This is not to say that one cannot find critical views of other religions in western academia but that there are inside the tradition views commonly available to balance these out. *It seems that no inside the tradition view is allowed for Hinduism, only criticism from hostile forces.*

Hindus being overall passive, tolerant and spirituallyoriented have not mounted an effort to challenge these stereotypes until recent years, so that these wrong views remain entrenched in the global media and educational system, though such colonial stereotypes against other religions, races and ethnicities have largely been removed in recent decades.

However, today Hinduism is no longer limited to India. Hindus and Hindu teachings have spread globally in spite of this strong propaganda against them. There are Hindu minorities in all continents, and Hindu-based spiritual teachings have been adapted by people of all lands and religions. Hindu minorities in the USA and UK are affluent and well-educated, modern and scientific, and yet still Hindu in their spiritual practices, quite unlike the missionary stereotypes of poor, backward and superstitious Hindus. Hindu based teachings like Yoga and Vedanta similarly have their appeal to progressive and better educated groups in the West. Hindus in the West and western born people following Hindu based practices show how hollow and wrong the views of Hinduism that we see in the textbooks and are slowly causing these to change.

Hinduism is beginning to appear like a religion of the future, a teaching for the emerging planetary age and the old stereotypes are totally out of place. Of all religions today, Hinduism is the most synthetic and can integrate all spiritual paths into a deeper quest for Self-realization. Hinduism, as a conscious formulation of the universal tradition, has the breadth to encompass, integrate and transcend all religions. It has a wideness of cosmic vision which can not only embrace but extend the field of modern science into spiritual domains. So let us put the old colonial and missionary prejudices permanently to rest and look at this venerable tradition anew according to its value for everyone.

Come together, speak together, together let your minds arrive at a common understanding, just as the ancient Divinities in a common knowing honor the same Good.

Rig Veda X.191.2

He who does not know the Imperishable Word of the chant that dwells in the supreme ether, in which all the Divinities reside, what can he do with the Vedas? Those who know That, let them gather together here.

Rig Veda I.164.39

1.3 Religion and Spirituality: The Search for Universality

Religion, a Blessing or a Curse

Religion is not only probably the most profound and uplifting aspect of human life, but also the most ambiguous, contradictory and at times, destructive. Religions have, more than any other domain of human culture, served to instill ethical values and raise human beings to higher levels of consciousness. We see this in the mystics, saints, sages, seers and yogis who can be found, at least to some extent, in all the religious traditions of the world.

On the other hand, religions have been the main cause of misunderstanding, mistrust and hatred between human beings. They have been responsible for the greatest violence and inhumanity, and numerous instances of genocide, which persist to the present day. We see this in the inquisitions, crusades, holy wars, witch burning and terrorism perpetrated in the name of religion which often has

no respect for life, even trampling women and children along the way.

The term religion originally means ëto uniteí. At the deepest level, it refers to the unification of the soul or essence of our being with the Divine or the Supreme universal principle. This deeper definition of religion is the same as that of Yoga, which also refers to uniting the individual with the supreme reality. Religion ó properly understood as a means of union with our fellow human beings and with the underlying Divinity ó has brought many people to the awareness of the Divine as their true nature. Religion ó improperly understood as an exclusive belief system that places us against those who think differently ó has become the basis for pillage, plunder, wrecking entire cultures, and condemning to eternal hell our fellow human beings, our own brothers and sisters.

Perhaps nothing more than religion stimulates the passions of human beings towards either higher or lower actions. This is because religion introduces absolutes into human behavior. Religion sets up a standard of judgment that goes beyond life and death. Such a standard of absolutes can deepen our sensitivity or can breed bigotry, depending upon whether we use these principles to elevate our own behavior or to become harsher in our criticism of others. True religion directs us to an absolute of Being-Consciousness-Bliss that requires that we cleanse our minds of limited opinions and judgments. False and imperfect religion tries to make absolute the very prejudices, opinions and limitations that separate us.

To understand the higher purpose of religion, we must look at religion not as a mere belief system but as a way of life, a system of ethical, mental and spiritual culture. Otherwise we will be unable to extract the essence of religion from its mass of conflicting practices. We must examine religion as a living phenomenon, as part of our greater human potential, our inner dharma; from whatever different land or culture it may arise. We must learn to look at religion as a means of connecting with universal reality through our own consciousness, which is the view of the science of Yoga. This is the view of religion that India has given us, the land where human beings have spent the most time in pursuit of the sacred, not to convert others, but to realize the universal truth.

We may think that it is best not to examine religion, which is after all a matter of faith. Let each person follow whatever religion he or she prefers. However, in the modern world, we must strive to understand all people and all cultures. To compartmentalize religion into various faiths, each which leaves the others alone, would be like saying let each country speak its own language, and we will speak our own, but let us not try to learn the language of others or strive to develop any global language. This superficial sense of tolerance hides a contraction of fear and insecurity. As human beings, all religions and all cultures belong to each one of us and we should be free to examine each for whatever value it may have, just as all of science is there for us to study without boundaries.

Religion, properly speaking, concerns the ultimate questions of life and death. To approach it we must question deeply, including questioning religion itself and, above all, questioning ourselves. We must ask: What it is that we are really seeking through religion? Are we really seeking the truth or to know God? Or is religion merely something to believe in externally and then stop searching?

Is religion merely a church to belong to, a new identity, to be part a group of people who can provide us comfort and support? Is religion a social movement to take over the world and convert it to a belief that is meant to arouse our missionary zeal? Is true religion the certainty that we will have ultimate salvation and happiness, and those who follow different beliefs will be punished by God?

These are emotional and vital urges that, however powerful, have little to do with the search for truth, which being universal cannot cater to human partialities. Such urges cause us to distort reality according to our personal and collective desires. They are not part of a genuine seeking of truth, but a further development of our egoistic drives. Religion should be the search within our own being for

the truth of this wonderful universe in which we live, its indwelling Spirit. Otherwise we should probably call it something else.

What is the universal element in religion, which like the universal element in art can reveal its essence? Can the essence of religion be found in the churches, holy books, or priests? Does it lie in religious controversies, conflicts and holy wars? Or does it reside in the ultimate aspirations of our deepest heart which no single group can own or dispense? Is the truth of religion unique to one religion, is it present in all religions, or does it perhaps exist beyond all of them?

Has our religious urge existed because of or in spite of what society has institutionalized and enforced as religion? Is religion as we commonly think of it a formulation of spiritual aspiration, or a limitation and deformation of it? What is the basis for real spirituality and can it be found within the confines of organized religion at all? These are some of the many questions we must examine and find the answers for within ourselves, through contemplation and meditation.

Fundamentalist Religion or Universal Spirituality?

In the modern world, many of us are not really interested in religion, and perhaps wisely so. Business, sports, entertainment, politics and other outward aspects of life are the main focus of our attention, and these are less controversial and divisive than religion, which appears to be a hold over from the dark and troubled Middle Ages. Given the nature of what we call religion with its sin, guilt, fear, and even vengeance, there appears to be little reason why we should have much regard for it. It can appear as an emotional negativity devoid of common courtesy, not to speak of love, compassion and humanity.

And if we are interested in religion, it is usually not the inner side that concerns us. It is our particular church, the religion of our fathers, our nation or our community, which we are trying to promote at an outer level though politics and conversion. The inner search for truth through introspection and meditation seems forgotten.

Fortunately, many of us are able to look beyond the institutionalized religions which have controlled the world over the last two thousand years. Religion as a belief system ó the idea that one religion owns the Divine or truth as if it were a kind of property ó is a medieval phenomenon, the product of a dark age of lack of scientific knowledge and global communication. This division of religions appears on par with the division of races, nations, languages and currencies, not a fundamental truth but a harmful fragmentation of human society.

Religion as it is generally known in the western world, and its culture which now dominates the world, projects an exclusive truth for a particular leader, book, or group of people and the need to convert the world to it ó which is contrary to the idea that there is an inherent universal truth within the hearts and minds of all creatures. Such organized religion formulates truth as an external authority rather than an inner experience and limits any real inward search for the Divine.

This exclusivist idea of religion may have one God but it has two humanities ó the believers and the non-believers ó and regards the non-believers as inferior or sinful ó to be converted or conquered ó which leads to every sort of misunderstanding and exploitation. Its concern is not union with God but elimination of the non-believers. It does not aim at making us better people but at changing those who do not outwardly conform to what we think is religious. As we are beginning to come together as a planet and recognizing our common humanity, such divisions can no longer be accepted. They no longer appear religious but inhumane, not much better than racism or ethnocentricity.

In a number of western countries today, particularly in Europe, only a small portion of the population attends church on a regular basis. Even if many people may still call themselves Christians, the designation is nominal, and in some places it is very difficult to find a single person

who could be called pious. For many people in the West, religion is a regressive word. We can no longer believe that only one religion is true. Some may doubt whether any religion is true.

Much of Asia is following a similar movement. The younger generation is often more interested in the pop culture imported from the West than in its own traditional religious or spiritual culture. The educated elite is proud of its modern, scientific, and humanitarian views and often criticize or denigrate the traditional religious background of their culture.

In this age of open communication and critical scrutiny, many of us have become painfully aware of the limitations of organized religion and itís herding of people into hostile camps. We have come to recognize that behind the rhetoric of God and religion is often political, economic or sexual exploitation ó not an enlightened or humanitarian force. Compared to such divisive creeds, science and humanitarianism, even of an atheistic bent, can appear more compassionate and enlightened.

Yet though the bonds of organized religion are breaking down in many places, the long term human seeking for the eternal and infinite, which is the essence of human nature, continues to exist and appears to be growing. More people are seeking experiential forms of spirituality to satisfy this internal longing. It is not so much that religion has failed us or become out of date, but that religion as we know it is not relevant to our inner needs. Religion as belief is losing its regard but religion as the seeking for direct knowledge of cosmic reality is undergoing a revival. There is a search for a new religion not as a new church, but as a universal spirituality beyond all organization. It is a return to dharma, a discovery of the laws of life.

However, a contrary and darker trend is also developing throughout the world that is shadowing this global spiritual awakening in a troubling manner. There has been over the past few years a powerful upsurge in religious fundamentalism, not only in the Middle East, but also in western and supposedly scientific countries like the United States. Such fundamentalism is an attempt to return to the rigid religious divisions of the Middle Ages. It reflects the intolerance inherent in exclusivist beliefs that seek to convert the world and promote their theology as the only truth. This dangerous face of fundamentalism should be clarion call to all religious leaders to give up the sole claim to truth and to instead affirm pluralism in spiritual practices for all people.

In America, this fundamentalism is not just a thing of the past, but a modern media based phenomenon funding a multibillion dollar multi-national conversion business. Evangelical Christianity in America is a pop religion of slick TV preachers accompanied by country and western music singers. It offers instantaneous conversion at football stadiums, with wild prophecies and make believe miracles. Such religion is accompanied by little soul searching and few spiritual practices. Islamic fundamentalism, on the other hand, is more militant and does not hesitate to resort to violence, not only against those of other religious backgrounds but even against those among its own people who do not agree with its extreme views. It similarly appears to be growing in numbers and in sympathy.

This fundamentalist reaction does have a justification ó distorted though it certainly is ó and we cannot simply dismiss it as without any basis or redress. Western popular culture with its lack of higher values can lead people into a spiritual and moral wasteland. The weakening of the family system, increased sexual promiscuity and the rampant use of drugs leaves many people searching for a religious belief to save them from the chaos of their lives. Such individuals may lack the inner focus to search out a higher spiritual path through meditation, making them easy prey to the absolutist claims of fundamentalist beliefs for a quick answer to their dilemmas.

The criticism of degeneration leveled against modern consumerist culture by the fundamentalists is to a large extent accurate, even when their dogmatic and violent reactions to it are utterly wrong.

We do need to reconsider our relationship with the Divine, which we have sadly ignored. But the correct force to counter modern materialism lies in a universal experiential spirituality, not in a retreat into old religious prejudices. Religious fundamentalism only succeeds in making people backward and isolated from the progressive movement of time and communication, which renders their cultures regressive and sterile. It serves to make materialism look more humane by countering it with a force of superstition.

We must pass out of the duality of dogmatic religion and scientific materialism, which both have their excesses. True spirituality combines religious seeking with scientific inquiry. It is not based upon mere faith and belief but the inner practice of meditation in which we can learn to perceive the truth for ourselves. However, its search for the Divine is as an inner reality and its science is one of consciousness, not just a study of the forces of the external world.

Future Trends

One can foresee a future age of world peace and harmony in which what is valuable in each religion is honored, and serious individuals will seek Self-realization through meditation paths beyond the bounds of organized beliefs. We can no longer look upon the time of one ancient prophet and his small following as the golden age for all humanity. We have been too exposed to the rest of the world to pretend in a medieval way that our particular community is the only one honored by the Divine. We can paint our enemy as the devil but it is not so easy to make it believable any more. That we are all human beings with the same basic drives and potential is evident to all open minds.

The ugly head of religious fundamentalism still has a fair amount of bigotry and a number of terrorist tactics left but this is only a sign that it is being rejected by time. Whether it takes years or decades to go, it remains on the downward side of history. This is not to say that we should underestimate its power, which may have yet to reach its maximum, but that we should bring out real higher teachings that can effectively neutralize it. As long as we do not remove exclusivism in religious belief ó the idea that only one faith is true and all the others are false ó such fundamentalism is not likely to entirely pass away.

We live in a global age in which we must come together as a planet. For this we need a universal tradition that recognizes the sacred nature of all human beings regardless of their beliefs. Different cultures have developed different spiritual approaches, just as they have developed different types of art, music, literature, and philosophy. We can no longer say that only European art is good and that Chinese or Indian art is barbaric, for example, though even in the last century many educated Europeans had such views. We should have the same openness in the spiritual realm as we do in other domains of life. Unfortunately, the spiritual realm is where we have the most intolerance though, as the domain of life that deals with the infinite, it is a place where intolerance has no real place.

In seeking a new spirituality, we must remember that there are traditions that have survived to the present day, which though perhaps tainted or regressive in some aspects, can help catalyze it. The traditions of East Asia, particularly of India and Tibet, show the way to an authentic global spirituality.

They have never formulated themselves as exclusive belief systems, but as universal meditation paths. They have preserved ancient lineages of inner realization, the millennial heritage of a spiritual humanity, with great living masters. Such teachers are necessary guides for us to help develop our own authentic experiential wisdom. As western science moves to the East, eastern spirituality and its science of Yoga is coming to the West. This can serve to link up the two sides of human knowledge for the coming planetary age.

The western world has prided itself in modernity and rationality. Yet if we look deeply, we see

that it has also been guilty of various forms of prejudice and narrow mindedness, a Eurocentrism in religion, art and culture, the shadow of which still remains. Today we have been forced to recognize the inhumanity committed in the colonial era by western colonial powers, which led to slavery and genocide on a global scale. We must similarly recognize the accompanying cultural imperialism that has portrayed non-European communities in a negative light, particularly their spiritual traditions, and has reduced their histories to mere footnotes to events in Europe.

On top of this, we must recognize a similar genocide and destruction of cultures done by communists and Marxists as in the Soviet Union and Communist China. In fact, communists and radical socialists have promoted the same denigration of traditional non-western cultures as did the colonial powers, perhaps even to a greater degree. Indiaís communists, for example, have sustained the anti-Hindu propaganda of the British and Christian missionaries, which might otherwise have disappeared.

The judgment of eastern religions as pagan, idolatrous, and primitive, appears on par with the judgment of Asian and African peoples as racially inferior ñ not an enlightened discernment but an embarrassing prejudice. The attempt to discredit venerable and profound oriental cultures ñ which is still going on by missionary movements today ñ has been never motivated by seeking any real understanding but by political, economic and religious ambitions toward domination that avoid real dialogue and communication.

The West can no longer look down upon Asian culture. The Japanese have shown how well the Asians can compete on all levels of modern culture. The Chinese and the Indians are not far behind, as their two resurgent economies now indicate. We have come to recognize the value of Asian systems of Yoga, meditation, natural healing, martial arts, music and painting. We have seen the skill of easterners as scientists, artists, doctors, and businessmen.

Just as Asia is resurgent, Africa and South America in the dawning century will likely learn to apply modern technology according to their own cultural and religious backgrounds. This may present the western world with a scientifically and economically more advanced third world following older spiritual traditions largely outside of dominant western religions.

Older indigenous religions as a whole will experience a revival. Europe will once more encounter and integrate its preChristian past. The spiritual depth of ancient myths and rituals, especially in pagan teachings, will become obvious to a deeper psychological vision. The Middle East and North Africa will have to deal with their pre-Islamic past, particularly the Egyptian and Babylonian traditions that modern archeology has uncovered, and come to recognize the value of their older images and icons.

The mystical side of all religions will become prominent and ideological side will recede. Spiritual, yogic and occult movements of all kinds will continue to gain much interest all over the world. Syncretic religious movements that combine various teachings will proliferate. In addition, futuristic religious ideas arise with a seeking to contact the greater reality of the mysterious universe in which we live in new ways not reflecting older traditions.

There are many signs of such a new awakening. The already existing interest in eastern (dharmic) religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism reflects this trend. The upsurge of interest in Native American traditions, western occultism, pagan practices, and shamanism is another indication. A renewed interest in the mystical side of western religions is another. Another indication is a seeking of spirituality through modern psychology and modern physics.

One of the religions which will greatly benefit from the new spirituality is Hinduism, whose universality allows for such a global integration of culture and spirituality. Modern spiritual teachers

from the Hindu tradition ó like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Yogananda, Shivananda and Mahatma Gandhi, to mention a few ó have been at the forefront of the new universality in religion and experiential forms of spirituality. Sanskrit terms like Yoga, karma, gurus, mantras, Kundalini and chakras have entered into common parlance and become the basis for many new insights.

Hinduism ó which had appeared as a contracted religion in retreat for many centuries ó is experiencing a new revival and expanding its influence throughout the globe. Its teachings under different garbs like Vedanta, Yoga, Tantra, and Ayurveda are one of the main thrusts of the new spirituality. A Hindu spirit, a sense of universality, tolerance and nonexclusivism, is arising in the minds of many people today. Therefore, it is important that we reexamine this ancient spiritual tradition that has so many dimensions and so much unexplored depth.

Where all books of knowledge become one; that is the conscious Self of all beings.
Taittiriya Aranyaka III.11.20

Yoga is the calming of the disturbances of the heart. Patanjali, Yoga Sutras I.2

The teacher guides the student in the meaning of the Vedas: Speak the Truth, practice the Dharma, do not be heedless in your self-study.
Taittiriya Upanishad I.19

Neither agency, nor action does the Lord create for the world, nor the experience of the fruits of action. All this occurs according to the nature of things.
The Lord does not recognize the good or evil done by anyone. Knowledge is covered by ignorance, by which creatures become deluded.
But those whose ignorance is destroyed by knowledge of the Self, for them like the Sun, that knowledge reveals the Supreme.
Bhagavad Gita V.14-16

1.4 Religion or Dharma: Belief or the Nature of Truth

In the western world, religion is usually associated with a belief in something unseen, miraculous, perhaps even irrational. For the western mind, religion is often removed from ordinary existence and apart from the world of nature, something supernatural or miraculous. Religion thus becomes a matter of faith, even if that faith contradicts our experience.

This belief based idea of religion has no such centrality in the teachings of India. The term for any spiritual teaching in India is dharma, which refers to natural law and universal principles, a matter not of faith, but of knowledge. What we call the religions of India ó like Hinduism and Buddhism ó are ways of cultivating dharma and developing higher awareness. To follow the dharma requires living in harmony with the universe attuned to the consciousness of the universal being.

Discovery of the dharma occurs through direct perception and living experience, in which we come to understand the nature of things and how they really work. Each thing has its dharma, its nature or way of being, whether it is a force like fire, an emotion like love or hate, or an individual human being. If we try to understand the dharma of things rather than assert a belief, we can come into contact with the essence of existence and discovery the unity and interdependence of all. If we emphasize dharma rather than religion, there will be no more religious conflicts in the world. Religion will dissolve into an inner search for truth through Yoga and meditation.

True religion means to recognize the dharma, the underlying universal truth, and to build our life and culture around it. Just as the same physical laws, like gravity, operate for all human beings regardless of race, nationality or religion, so the same spiritual laws, like the law of karma, are in operation for everyone. These are the dharmas that we must discover. To discover the nature of dharma, we must approach the universe with an open mind and heart, not coming with any preconceived belief or theory.

Dharma as the nature of things is the eternal constant, the self-existent reality. No one doubts that fire burns, its very existence proclaims it. Everything in the world similarly proclaims its dharma or place in the universal order through the qualities that it demonstrates. Each person has his or her own dharma, a unique place and function in the cosmic rhythm. To know the dharma is to discover not only the unity of truth but all the variations upon it.

Yet while we can easily perceive the nature of physical objects, it is difficult to perceive our mental states and their long term consequences. We do not easily see the results of our own actions because these effects manifest only through time and sometimes not until future lives. To learn the real consequences of what we are doing, we must first purify our minds and hearts by right living and meditation. Just as a person who puts his hand in a fire must suffer, though there is no intent on the part of fire to hurt anyone, so when we violate natural law, we must suffer. Greed, anger, and hatred are negative forces that harm us as well as those we may injure through them.

We have one basic choice in life. We can choose to be dharmic, which is to follow the laws of the universe, or we can choose to be *adharmic*, which is to try to go against them. To be religious in the true sense is to be dharmic, which is to recognize the sacred nature of all beings. Unfortunately, to be irreligious has often been portrayed by organized religion as the rejection of some arbitrary dogma rather than living out of harmony with the universe. This view must be changed if we are to discover what is real. Religion must base itself upon the pillar of natural law and immutable truth, not upon human opinion and transient convention. Otherwise it must lead us down the road of decay and destruction, whatever higher it may aspire to.

The Dharma of the Human Being

As human beings we are in doubt as to our true nature. This is a simple fact that each one of us can observe. We do not know who we really are or our real purpose in life. We do not know what happened to us before we were born or what will happen after we die. As individuals, we think it is our purpose is to achieve various outer goals like pleasure, wealth, fame, or power. Yet none of these achievements brings lasting happiness as we can easily see by examining the lives of the people who have gained them. Collectively, we also seek to gain power, territory, or mastery of the external world, which similarly does not lead to real peace or happiness in society as the ongoing crime and wars in the world reveals. Unlike the rest of nature, we appear not to know our place in the universe or how we can find happiness. We are perpetually seeking something we do not have.

There is a reason for this uncertainty; the dharma of the human being is to search out and discover the universal truth. We have no fixed outer dharma, no instinctual programming like animals that we cannot deviate from, but only an inner dharma to bring a higher consciousness into the world. While the nature of other creatures is evident, our human dharma must be created, must be won as it were, and requires a tremendous labor to bring forth. This is the work of spiritual practice or *sadhana* in Hindu thought.

The spiritual life exists beyond the limited names and forms of objective and material existence. Dharma is not a mere name, a belief or an ëismí, but the indicator of the eternal truth beyond all opinions. Sanatana Dharma or the universal dharma is not a name and form based system. The name of the religion we follow outwardly is not what matters, but who we really are and what we are actually doing in life on a daily basis. It doesnít matter if we are called pious according to one religious authority or excommunicated by another. The real issue is whether we are introducing a greater consciousness into the world through how we live and think.

Whatever name or form one may look up to in religion is not of ultimate significance but how it is used to approach the inner reality. If concentrating on God in the form of a rock aids in preparing the

mind for meditation, such a rock is a great dharma, a great truth. On the other hand, if the idea of a Supreme Being encourages only dogmatism and sectarianism, such a God is an obstacle to our spiritual life, not the reality of the Divine.

Dharma and the Religions of the World

The different religions of the world represent different dharmas or approaches to ultimate truth only to the extent that they direct us towards inner realization. In this regard, all experiential spiritual paths can be viewed as aspects of a Sanatana Dharma or universal truth.

The religions that have their origins in India have always emphasized dharma. Buddhism is called ëBuddha Dharmaí, the law or truth taught by the Buddha or the enlightened one, the dharma of enlightenment. Jainism is called the ëJain Dharmaí, the truth or teaching of the Jina or the one who has conquered his own nature. Sanatana Dharma, or the Eternal Dharma, is the basis of Hinduism and explains its continuity and its many sided nature.

The great sages of Hinduism have never regarded themselves as limited to a belief. They have always looked upon themselves as followers of Sanatana Dharma, the universal tradition of truth. The term Sanatana Dharma can be found in Buddhist and Jain teachings as well, as this movement toward universality is part of the culture of India and the Himalayan region as a whole.

Another important term for Hinduism has been *Manava Dharma*, the dharma of mankind or human beings. Hinduism has examined the full human potential and created teachings for all types and temperaments of people, and all aspects of human life. It holds that all human beings must eventually come to the realization of their true nature and provides various teachings and practices in order to facilitate this.

We could say that there are two basic types of religious teachings in the world. The first are belief-oriented systems which emphasize sin and salvation leading to either an eternal heaven or hell. Their idea of cosmic law is something imposed from above by the will of God, which may at times appear to be arbitrary or even vengeful. The world of nature is looked upon as an outside reality to be controlled or conquered, a realm of temptation, not part of our own being. Man is given dominion over nature, rather than finding nature to be a part of himself.

Second are dharmic traditions which emphasize natural law, meditation and Yoga practices leading to Self-realization. Dharmic traditions seek to know the truth of things and do not set forth any final dogma. Most indigenous and tribal religions, with their connection to natural law, can be considered to be dharmic teachings, as they similarly regard all life as sacred.

Yet among the mystics of all religious traditions, who are often rejected by the orthodox, we find a respect for life and a practice of meditation similar to dharmic traditions. Among these are Jewish and Christian mystics and Sufis. In addition, there are many mystical and occult groups outside of organized religion, like the Rosicrucians and Theosophists, which recognize the doctrine karma and rebirth that characterizes dharmic traditions. New Age religious movements as well are bringing in many factors of dharma.

One could argue that dharma is the real impetus behind all religions but that it has been distorted by various vested interests into dogma and authority. Similarly, there are adharmic elements in all religions, even those of a yogic nature, as the human ego can distort and abuse any higher truth.

Relative to this concept of dharma, Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma remains generic. It is not a particular dharma but the dharma as such, reflecting a concern for dharma as a whole. It is not the dharma of any teacher, nor does it exclude any particular dharma. For this reason, Hinduism is not so much a particular religion but encompasses all that could be called religion. Sanatana Dharma is an attempt to embrace all dharmas, not to set up one against another. So too, our concern in religious

study should be with religion as whole, not with one religion or another. We should be asking not what is the truth of this or that religion but what is the truth of religion?

Religion and Belief

Religion as generally known in the western world is defined rather neatly, but perhaps simplistically, by the formula of a belief. Religion is a belief in One God, one primary representative of him, and one book of revelation. The right belief is said to bring about salvation. The wrong belief is thought to be the worst of all sins and bring about damnation. Such religions try to convert the entire world to their belief, which they view as salvation for humanity.

While such monolithic systems can state their beliefs in clear and uncomplicated terms, they sound more like slogans or stereotypes ó absolute statements that appeal to an emotional need for security but fail to deal with the real complexity of life. Is truth really that simplistic or have we narrowed it down according to a bias which, however well intentioned, falls short of what life in its abundance really is?

Why should God have only one Son when all things come from Him? Why should there be a final prophet when there were previous prophets, and the capacity of spiritual knowledge can be found in all people? Why should there be only one Bible or religious book when any number of books on other subjects are possible? Is the Word of God so limited that it can be put into one book for all time? Can the Divine Word be reduced to human language at all? And is it salvation that we need or self-understanding? Does mere belief change us or is a more intimate contact with the truth necessary?

A statement of exclusive absolutes is not possible for dharmic traditions like Hinduism, or even regarded as desirable. From a universal perspective such restrictions appear arbitrary. They reflect not as a deep understanding of the infinite that satisfies the soulís longing to merge into the Divine, but an attempt to arrive at a mental or emotional formulation that mirrors the egoís need for control.

Only that which is absolute can be absolute. The eternal can be absolute, but to assert finality for a particular person or event in the historical realm is to try to make absolute that which is relative. This process is not spirituality, but spiritual materialism, confusing the absolute which is formless with a particular form.

And why should a belief be asserted at all? Rather the dharma should be recognized. Does not the truth of things speak for itself if we are open to it? We donít have to shout to the world that the sun shines. It is an experiential fact. So too, spiritual realities should be experienced. The insistence on belief usually indicates lack of experience and can prevent people from developing any direct experience of their own.

Let us be clear: Belief is not knowledge. A belief is an assumption, at best a working proposition that can help us find the truth. But if we take a belief as true in its own right, it becomes a preconception that clouds our vision. For example, in order to climb a mountain I must first believe I am capable of it. But if I regard believing I can climb the mountain is the same thing as actually climbing it, then my belief is a delusion which breeds not only incapacity but unreality. While belief may have preliminary value, it must be set in the background as we move along the path.

Belief in God is not the same as knowing God, though it may assert what God is supposed to have said. And how can we know what someone has said if we donít know who they really are? If we ourselves do not know God, how can we fulfill his will? And if we donít know God within ourselves, how can we know his reality on the outside?

To know a particular food, like grapes, we must actually eat them. It is not enough to believe in grapes or believe in another person who once ate them. Belief is no substitute for knowledge and by itself it cannot destroy our ignorance. The process of belief building can reinforce the ignorance of

the mind which asserts its mental and emotional patterns as truth.

Any number of beliefs are always possible because beliefs are speculative, with no ultimate certainty for any of them. One religion has its set of beliefs, which are said to be the absolute truth. Another religion has a different set of beliefs claimed to be equally true. One religion asserts that God is only this and another proclaims that God is only something else. One religion makes a particular representative of God as final; another does the same with another figure who may have a different teaching. This process of belief building leads to division. As belief is not knowledge but emotional assertion, belief often ends up in the battlefield, not to determine which belief is true but which will dominate the world. Belief removes us from spiritual experience, which inherently takes us beyond beliefs.

Theological Ethics and Universal Dharma

Exclusivist religions erect theological standards for judging human behavior, which may be apart from or even contrary to any real ethics. They hold that if a person does not believe in a particular formulation of God, in one specific representative of him, in one book which contains his word, or other such dogmas, that the person will suffer or go to hell, however good, kind, compassionate, generous, or selfless he or she may otherwise be. This can be called ëtheological ethicsí, the judgment of people not by their actual behavior but by their beliefs, which makes not accepting certain beliefs into a moral failure on par with actually committing harmful actions.

Some theological ethics, for example, teach that not going to church on Sunday is a mortal sin, along with crimes like theft or murder. Theological morality gets confused with universal ethics, as if not following the articles of belief of a particular religion was as universally wrong as lying, stealing or harming others. It causes people of one belief to consider that those who do not accept their belief must be morally depraved or even subhuman in their values and actions.

Sanatana Dharma cannot accept any theological morality. It says that we raise ourselves up in life by good actions and lower ourselves by actions which are harmful. It does not matter what we believe in but what we do. Hinduism says that a person who leads a good life, even if he or she has never come into contact with any scripture and has no religious beliefs at all, will come to a good end. On the other hand, a person who leads a bad or harmful life will come to a bad end, even if he believes in what some regard is the true religion.

It is not irreligious activity that we should be afraid of ó the breaking the codes of belief, ritual or prayer of a particular church ó but adharmic actions, living out of harmony with the universal truth and contrary to the nature of things. Regarding only one belief alone as true is out of harmony with the universe, which includes all beings, and like the sun shines on all alike.

Theological morality divides humanity into the believers and the non-believers, the people of God and those of the devil, or whatever the religion decides, including condemning different sects within oneís own religion as heretical. This division is equated with a real division in behavior between good and evil, holy and unholy, as if only the members of a particular religion can be truly good and those of other beliefs must be evil.

Dharmic traditions differentiate human behavior into dharmic and adharmic; actions that further the truth and those that promote ignorance and illusion. There is no division of humanity into dharmic and adharmic souls because our soul or inner nature is inherently dharmic. The soul is our dharma. The difference is between those who know their true nature and those who do not. Knowledge or ignorance is a capacity of all human beings, and we must all strive to transition from the ignorance to the knowledge. Hence Dharma can never divide people into warring beliefs.

If there is only One God or truth, then there cannot be two humanities, the believers and the non-

believers. If reality is one, then humanity must also be one. To connect with the oneness of reality, we must first recognize the unity of human beings. If we cannot see the unity of human beings ó including our unity with those of different religious persuasions ñ then we cannot talk of the unity of God. True unity requires recognizing the common dharma of the soul, which is to seek the eternal, not to confine the soul under restrictive religious identities.

The Culture of the Dharma

Culture appears to be an outward thing, the changing codes and customs of different peoples, times and countries. If we look at the world, we see every sort of cultural variation in terms of language, clothes, diet, art, religion and so on. The spiritual path as something timeless and universal should be beyond culture and can begin only when we set cultural prejudices aside.

However, culture has a deeper meaning. The spiritual life is a type of cultivation. To flower in truth we must cultivate our nature, we must create a field for the soul to grow that embraces our entire life, both individual and collective. Dharma as a way of life is a type of culture. Culture also refers to how we live, the field created by our thoughts, feelings and actions. Naturally, this should have a certain harmony to it, not a rigid order but an organic ability to sustain our inner growth like soil that can nourish a healthy plant.

Modern spiritual teachers, including from India, have tried to purify their teachings of extraneous cultural factors. They have provided practices that can be applied irrespective of the cultural context. This allows people to employ universal meditation approaches without having to change the outer aspects of their life, work, appearance or even the religion that they follow. They need not become Hindus but can adapt Hindu-based teachings in a way that improves their lives according to the background that they come from.

While this non-cultural approach has its value, it does have a limitation. Many people today, particularly in the West, have rejected the cultural side of spiritual teachings, but remain immersed in materialistic or intellectual cultural patterns that can be contrary to the spiritual path. They have not taken up a spiritual culture ó like the study of yogic teachings, chanting, ritual, and spiritual art ó but have continued with the popular culture of entertainment or an intellectual culture of politics, art and science. Some people in India follow this trend as well. Many of us practice spiritual teachings but remain otherwise immersed in a materialistic cultural matrix. In this process, we are coming under the influence of outer cultural influences, which may not always support our spiritual growth.

It is important that we recognize the nature of the culture that we surround ourselves with and are clear as to its values and how they affect us. While we can apply spiritual teachings outside of any single cultural context, this does mean that we can ignore the nature of the culture that we are following. We cannot graft spiritual teachings onto a non-spiritual culture and expect them to work. Nor do we need to reject the cultural side of spiritual teachings when it may be useful in enriching our lives.

Different spiritual traditions have created various cultures. Yet of the worldís cultures, the most spiritual in nature is probably that of India, which has placed the greatest emphasis on Self-realization. This spiritual culture of India is the culture of Yoga, the culture of the Dharma. The culture of the Dharma is the richest of all cultures because it is a universal culture. It is the civilization of the cosmic mind which transcends the limitations of mere human social structures. It includes systems of physical, mental, and spiritual culture. It contains art, music, poetry, philosophy, medicine, and astrology. It provides a rich field in which all parts of our being can grow toward the light.

We should examine our lives and see how much of our time is spent in areas of culture which are

unspiritual. If we do not nourish a dharmic culture, then we will not be able to lead a dharmic life or to create a dharmic society. If we are going to immerse ourselves in a culture, let it be the culture of the Dharma. This may require daily Yoga practices, mantra, meditation, chanting, devotional singing, pujas, rituals, satsangs and pilgrimages. It may include studying or practicing the dharmic systems of music, dance and poetry, or following an Ayurvedic life style or healing discipline. Hinduism provides us the resources in order to do this.

As rivers flowing to the sea discard their names and forms, so the person of spiritual knowledge, liberated from name and form enters into that celestial Being who transcends all.

Mundaka Upanishad III.2.8

That which they call Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Agni, as also the celestial beautiful feathered eagle - That which is the One Being, the sages declare in manifold ways.

Rig Veda I.164.46

He whom the Shaivites worship as Shiva, whom the Vedantins call Brahman, whom the Buddhists call Buddha, whom the Nayakas call the creator, whom the Jains call the Arhat, whom the Mimamsakas call karma, may that Vishnu, the Lord of the three worlds, grant you the object of your desire.

Stotra to Vishnu *The Divine immortal Fire gives power to the Gods, so the Eternal Dharmas cannot be violated.*

Rig Veda III.3.1.

1.5 The Great Tradition of Hinduism, Sanatana Dharma

Hinduism is the oldest, most complex and most enigmatic of the worldís major religions and the most different as compared to western monotheistic traditions. Hinduism, we could say, represents the other side of religion ó the ancient, imagistic, occult, mystical and yogic side that western monotheism has tried to supplant, if not exterminate.

Pagan religions, of which Hinduism is the main representative in the world today, are not simply primitive, immoral or oppressive as they have been portrayed by their detractors. As the unknown, the other, the opposition, as it were, monotheistic traditions projected their own fears and suspicions upon them. Western religions have similarly judged Hinduism according to the limited perception caused by their beliefs which, like a particular language, condition us to a particular point of view.

Dharmic traditions are experiential rather than belieforiented. They are open, creative and meditative in approach, an attitude often shared by western pagan religions and philosophies. Such experiential traditions have a great appeal to the inquiring spirit, with their knowledge of deeper levels of consciousness. They have a history of tolerance and respect for other views, a necessary attitude in the multi-cultural world order in which we live today. Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma has always been able to accommodate many different religious and spiritual approaches. From its standpoint religious beliefs are not absolutes but merely working models, guides to practice, which must eventually be left behind once we reach the goal.

Hinduism abounds with every possible name and form for truth or the Divine. This is because Hinduism requires that we see the same reality in all the diversity of creation ó that we see the same Self in all beings. It is not because Hinduism is trapped in the diversity of name and form but because its sense of unity is inclusive, not exclusive. As a formulation of Sanatana Dharma, Hinduism is not limited even to its own names and forms, however diverse. It can accommodate the names and forms of all religions into a comprehensive view of the Divine that accepts all that is true in human religious aspiration wherever it may arise. It allows the teaching of Hinduism to encompass all time and all religion, and affords it a characteristic tolerance and syncretic view of life.

However, the western mind, used to historically-based monotheistic creeds, tends to reduce religion to a particular name and form. It tries to compartmentalize Hinduism into a religion the way

Christianity and Islam exist today, seeking to find in all religions a particularized belief system. Looking for such a code of beliefs, many westerners regard the diversity and freedom of Hinduism as confusion, contradiction, or the sign of a lack of consistency. They may take it to mean that there is no real tradition of Hinduism as such but just a collection of unrelated cults. Yet this seeming chaos of Hindu Dharma reflects the broad field of a universal tradition that cannot be reduced to any limited pattern.

Sanatana Dharma as an open tradition does not exclude any useful way of approaching the truth of the vast universe in which we live. It does not define itself against something else but includes all that is helpful to the spiritual life. Yet this does not mean that Hinduism can accept all other religions as they formulate themselves to be. This is not possible because exclusive systems that insist their point of view alone is correct are mutually contradictory. In accepting the value of all sincere approaches to the Divine, Sanatana Dharma cannot sanction the exclusivism of any particular group. Hindus may honor the good works that Christians may do, for example, but this does not mean that Hinduism accepts the Christian claim that Christ is the only Son of God.

The Name Hinduism

It is a great irony that Hinduism ó the main religion in the world which has defined itself as a universal tradition ó has come to be viewed as a narrow ethnic belief system. Perhaps the main factor that causes us to misunderstand Hinduism is that Hinduism is originally a religion without a name, a religion in fact beyond names.

The name Hinduism suggests a belief limited to a certain geographical region, ethnic group or nation ó the religion of the people who inhabit the Indian subcontinent, who are sometimes regarded as a certain primitive dark-skinned racial type. This is a misconception that reflects little knowledge of Hinduism or of India and its inhabitants. It would like calling Islam ëthe religion of the Arabsí, or Christianity ëthe Greek religioní, which terms were historically used for these religions when they were more circumscribed in the regions that followed them.

India is not a small and homogeneous country like France, Germany or Great Britain but a subcontinent like Europe. In fact, India contains more different ethnic groups and languages than that of Europe as a whole. Modern India has fourteen official state languages which have a variety of scripts. The Punjabis of North India and the Tamils of the South are as distinct peoples than the Swedes of Northern Europe from the Greeks of Southern Europe.

Hindus come from a number of different races and ethnic groups even within India. The people of Nepal, though a Mongolian race like the Tibetan and Chinese, are predominately Hindus in religion. The tribal groups of India, many of which are not Caucasian or Mongolian but of the Austric race, are predominately Hindus. Hinduism remains in the island of Bali in Indonesia, which region it once predominated, and has left an important imprint upon the culture of the area. Hinduism once dominated Indochina wherein the Angkor Wat temple complex abounds with Hindu temples. Vietnam was a Hindu country up into the seventeenth century. Afghanistan was dominated by Hinduism into the tenth century. Hindu influence existed in Persia, Central Asia and the Middle East, not only by Hindu traders but by Hindu converts. Even a number of ancient Greeks became Hindus after they settled in India.

The name Hinduism goes back to ancient times. The Sanskrit name of the Indus River, Sindhu, gave rise to Hindu, Indus and India. The Persians pronounced Sindhu as Hindu, as did some groups within India itself. The Greeks pronounced it as Indus, giving rise to the term India in later European thought. The *Vedas* speak of *Sapta Sindhu* or the ëland of the seven riversí, which became Hapta Hindu in Persian and the basis for the term Hinduism. Hinduism is thus originally a geographical

term. It does not define the Hindu religion as such but simply identifies the region from which other cultures have usually contacted it.

The term Hindu cannot be found in the classical texts of Hinduism. It is not found in the *Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita*, or the classical books on Yoga. What we call Hinduism defines itself as Dharma, which does occur commonly in all the ancient texts, or more specifically as Sanatana Dharma. As Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition, Hinduism does not need to represent itself as one religious identity as opposed to others. If we live in the ocean, for example, do we have to give water a name? Hinduism has never separated itself off from the universal truth and formulated itself as one point of view regarded as exclusively true. While the convenience of modern language may require that we use the term Hinduism for this great tradition, let us not forget its real implications.

Sanatana Dharma and the Movement of Time

From the eternal vision of Sanatana Dharma, history is not a linear progression but a cyclic return and spiral, indicated by the lotus which is the most enduring symbol of Hinduism. We are ever moving around the great center of truth which resides within us. While we may divide people up into separate identities, religious or otherwise, but through that we are only fragmenting our own deeper unity with all. While we may place human beings on a progressive time line leading to heaven or utopia, we are only removing ourselves from eternity, in which alone is liberation.

The timeless view of Sanatana Dharma affords two aspects to its teachings. First the same basic or eternal teaching endures throughout all its diverse layers, like a single thread on which many gems are woven. Second, and complementary to this, the teaching is reformulated anew with every generation relative to the needs of time, place and person. The teaching of Sanatana Dharma in this way is both eternal and ever-new. This is its twofold beauty. It abides in the timeless present.

This means that the Hindu tradition is not only the oldest of the worldís religion, it is also the newest. On one hand, having no founder it goes back to beginningless time. On the other hand, being recast by living sages in every generation, Hinduism always reflects the present moment. The Hindu religion provides not only the oldest teaching in the world but living exponents of it in every age, great gurus who have realized the Divine Self. Sanatana Dharma teaches that we are all that Divine Being and that we must realize it within our own lives. It is a religion that is coterminous with Life itself.

Seeing no final goal within the realm of time, Hinduism is thought by some to be outside of the progressive movement of history. However, being oriented in the eternal, Hinduism sees the final goal as present within each moment of time. It is not bound to a history that makes us look to the future rather than to the present, but teaches that the eternal itself pervades all the waves of time.

A New Look At Hinduism

There is not a lot of good literature available in western languages on Hinduism and little understanding of its true meaning as Sanatana Dharma. Most of the existing literature attempts to fit Hinduism into the mold of western religions, which it does not resemble. Those who do this generally criticize Hinduism for not living up to a standard it never had, expecting Hinduism to also have a clearly defined dogma of One God, one representative of him, and one book. While there is a significant literature on the different branches of Hinduism like Yoga, Vedanta, Vaishnavism or Shaivism, there is little that explains their position within the greater Hindu tradition.

Hindus, with an open and inclusive view, have seldom found it necessary to define what a Hindu actually is as distinct from the practitioner of another religion. For many Hindus, Hinduism as a universal tradition includes everyone except those who willfully exclude themselves from it, and they may not regard such exclusion as real either. Some Hindus do not even like to be called Hindus

because they think the name detracts from the universality of their teaching.

Academic views of Hinduism focus on particular aspects of this broad tradition and seldom address it as a whole. They rarely discuss the idea of Sanatana Dharma, which they seldom understand. Few books have attempted to define what all Hindus have in common. Hinduism, like its motherland of India, is like a tropical jungle, extending up to the highest mountains in the world, which no simplistic view can adequately characterize.

Most of the studies of Hinduism available in the West and even in India remain limited and unreliable. They fail to see the unity of the tradition and merely examine formal differences between different Hindu sects or practices, often placing one teaching in conflict with another. Instead of looking for the common thread, they try to divide off Veda and Tantra, or Vedanta and Yoga, often on what are little more than semantic grounds. These are largely exercises in the discriminating intellect of academicians which miss the real truth of the teaching. Another vision is required, not merely for better understanding Hinduism but for better understanding our own reality, which is what Sanatana Dharma is all about.

Hinduism and Organized Religion

Hinduism is not an organized religion such as the West ordinarily considers one to be. There is no Hindu church, no Hindu Pope, no Hindu Rome, Jerusalem or Mecca that all Hindus should go to or bow towards. There is no Hindu messiah or prophet all Hindus must revere and no one Hindu Bible all Hindus must read. Hinduism has no single day of the week for worship or no one prescribed mass, ritual or call to prayer that everyone must do. The different sects within Hinduism have their different ashrams, temples, leaders, holy places, holy days and holy books. Many of these are in common but there is no one set for all.

Hinduism does not rest upon external organization but on internal freedom. It has never structured itself along monolithic lines, with a set dogma and specific canon of beliefs for all. It has remained decentralized and localized, which is perhaps why of all the ancient mystical traditions, it alone has survived throughout the ages. Hinduism as an open tradition is relevant to all who are looking for a religion with a great diversity of teachings that does not require an exclusive belief. Hinduism is the religion of the individual and allows each person to choose his or her own approach to Divinity within themselves.

However, Hinduism is probably the best organized of all religions in that it contains systematic teachings for all manner of temperaments of people and all stages of life. As Sanatana Dharma, it has teachings that encompass all of human life and culture including medicine and science, art and music, occultism, spirituality and Yoga. In this regard, Hinduism has probably the most extensive, best organized and most complete teachings of all religions, addressing in detail all aspects of our existence, including those considered to be outside the domain of religion. The literature of Hinduism is probably both older and larger than that of any other religion.

Some people have wondered if Hinduism is a religion at all. They state that its very absence of organization and its nonseeking of converts disqualifies it from being a religion in the common sense of the word, that it fails to have a world view and is a purely local phenomenon. They would reduce Hinduism to a collection of local cults from the Indian subcontinent, holding on to every sort of primitive ritual and superstition that has long been discarded in the western world.

On the other hand, Hinduism contains many of the worldís most profound spiritual philosophies, like Vedanta, which have inspired great Western thinkers including Thoreau, Emerson, and Schopenhauer, as well as a number of important modern physicists. These are certainly not haphazard in their formulation or the product of local folk cults. They reflect the greatest minds of humanity and

a state of spiritual realization rarely achieved in the western world.

Hinduism accepts the validity of all aspects of human spiritual aspiration, from the use of simple images to formless meditational approaches. Those who judge it by one side only reveal their own lack of comprehension. Hinduism is a multidimensional tradition that no form of linear thinking, whether scientific or theological can grasp.

Certainly Hinduism stretches our limit of the idea of religion. Yet the very things that make Hinduism different from organized creeds provides it with perhaps a greater claim to be a religion in the true sense of the word, a teaching that helps us to unite with truth or the Divine. Though Hinduism is not a religion as a convenient and exclusive set of dogmas, it is a religion in that it addresses all the prime issues of life and death, God and immortality. Hinduism contains a consistent set of insights, principles and practices that reveal the highest truths of Self and cosmic knowledge. It provides specific and well-developed methodologies or paths of Yoga to enable us to perceive this truth in our own consciousness.

Hinduism has its characteristic spirit, universality and yogic view. This goes back to the most ancient Vedic texts and their ability to identify any name or form of the Divine with all others, as when the Vedas proclaim that the sacred fire, Agni, includes within itself all the Gods or Divine powers as the very power of light. Hinduism is a vibrant ocean of spiritual, religious and occult insights and practices, woven into a vast culture that includes the entire world of nature. It has the complexity of life itself, which cannot be reduced to a formula, understood in a single book, or controlled by any organization.

The Religions of Hinduism

There is perhaps a greater diversity of religions inside of Hinduism than outside of it. The different religions of the world do not have any greater variety of forms and practices than the different sects of Hinduism. We could say that as Sanatana Dharma or a universal approach, Hinduism is a collection of religions rather than a particularized religion as commonly understood. However, these different religions within Hinduism are integrated into a greater universal truth, not haphazardly thrown together. Each of the main sects of Hinduism can be seen as a religion in its own right. Several sects of Hinduism, like the Shaivite and Vaishnava, have a longer tradition and a more extensive literature than the predominant western religions.

Whatever can be found in any religion by way of forms of worship, including rituals, prayers, yogic practices and meditations of all kinds, or view of reality, including monotheism, pantheism, polytheism, agnosticism, atheism, and monism can be found in Hinduism. Each is respected according to its place in human development and none is allowed to be the last word for all people. This is not to say that all views and practices are regarded as equal or the same ó generally meditation is the highest practice and Selfrealization the highest goal ó but each practice is given its appropriate place.

One Christian fundamentalist group has said that there are only two religions in the world, Hinduism which absorbs everything and Christianity which excludes everything. One can be a Hindu and practice whatever religious teachings one finds beneficial, whether they arise from the Hindu tradition or outside of it. Hinduism defines itself as a pursuit of truth, not the insistence upon a particular belief. Another of its names is the ëreligion of truthí, *Satya Dharma*. It says that truth alone wins, not untruth. One does not cease to be a true Hindu by pursuing truth in different forms but only be ceasing to pursue truth and instead promoting dogma.

India, the Land of Religion and Spirituality

The universal spirit of Hinduism is manifest in India, which contains more religions than all the rest of the world put together. All the main religions of the world are present in India as in no other

country. Besides the many branches of Hinduism, India contains the Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, which originated from the country. India has also become the land of refuge for many religious groups. It contains Parsees, representatives of the ancient Zoroastrian religion of Persia, which itself is similar in language and deities to the ancient Vedic religion of India. There is an ancient Jewish tradition in India going back to pre-Christian eras, and a Syrian Christian tradition going back to the fourth century.

Surprisingly, there is a greater diversity of Islamic groups in India than in any Islamic country in the world, which includes Sunnis, Shias, Ahmadiyas, Ismaelis, Bohris, and Sufis, a number of which, as unorthodox Muslims, are banned in orthodox Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The largest Bahai temple in the world is in Delhi and the Theosophists have perhaps their largest following in India. The acceptance of such diversity is explicable only through the open tradition of Hinduism, as non-Hindu countries do not have such diversity of groups.

The World View of Hindu Dharma

The Vedantic world view, which is the main philosophy behind Hinduism, rests upon an ultimate and impersonal reality or Brahman, and sees the world as a manifestation of Brahman, as possessing no independent reality of its own. It says that Brahman is the supreme truth. For this view, Hinduism is sometimes accused of rejecting the world, denying life, and not giving proper importance to the individual, while religions that fail to recognize such a transcendent reality are considered progressive because they rest upon a personal and historical concept of the Divine and try to convert all people to their beliefs.

Yet Hinduism does not reject the reality of the world, only the idea that it exists apart from the Divine. Hinduism abounds with reverence for the Divine in all the forms of life and all aspects of nature, including animals, plants, rivers and mountains. It honors all aspects of the personal worship of God with forms of the Divine Father, Mother, Lover, Friend, and Lord. Moreover, it says that the individual is God (aham Brahmasmi, ayam Atma Brahma). It emphasizes the full realization of the Divine in the Universal Being that is our true nature.

These two most salient features of Sanatana Dharma ó its seeing of the Divine in innumerable forms and its recognition of the Divine reality that transcends all forms and actions ó are not contradictory but two sides of the same vision which not only recognizes the Absolute but finds it in all existence. Those who see Hinduism as either caught in the formless or as caught in the diversity of form only reveal their inability to understand its teaching. How can the same teaching be criticized in such opposite ways? It is like criticizing a person for being both too impersonal and too personal at the same time.

Owing to its otherworldly nature and rejection of mundane goals (including heaven, which as another world is also a mundane goal), Hinduism is said to be pessimistic or anti-life by its detractors. They emphasize the image of Hindu yogis and ascetics mortifying themselves, closing their senses, fasting and weakening their bodies. This is perhaps the most misinformed judgment against Hinduism. Hinduism teaches that we are all God, that we contain within ourselves all time and space, that our very nature is infinite bliss inherently transcending all sorrow and limitation.

To call a teaching which says that our nature is infinite bliss as pessimistic, while religions that teach we are born sinners or materialistic science that teaches we are only biochemical reactions, optimistic, is absurd. Hinduism says that all life arises from joy or Ananda and that we will all eventually return to eternal joy, however many mistakes we may make along the way. Religions that teach an eternal hell are the real pessimists, and those that teach an eternal heaven that still depends upon a body (which can never be eternal) are also pessimistic. Those who limit our being to this

transient life are the worst pessimists of all.

Universality in Religion and Conversion

Hinduism has been criticized as not being a universal religion because it does not actively seek converts and send out missionaries. Hinduism does not proselytize, but this is because of its universality, not owing to a lack of it. Its very universal view that honors the Divine in all also prevents it from becoming a religion of conversion. From its point of view, the seeking of converts is a sin against the Divine in others, a kind of salesmanship, which fails to recognize the Divine presence that is already there. However, Hinduism in its true expression shares its knowledge with those who are receptive. It is concerned with communicating the essence of truth not simply getting people to change religious labels. It regards truth as something we should search out inside ourselves, not try to impose on others as if it were an external thing.

Religious proselytizing is actually the denial of universality and an assertion of partiality. If truth is universal who are we going to convert and to what? Hinduism emphasizes recognizing the self-existent truth. We cannot be converted to truth but only to a belief, which is limited. A universal religion does not need to run after converts because it recognizes that we are always part of universal reality. No one can be excluded from it, though we may try to live apart from it.

From the Hindu standpoint, most attempts at religious conversion are forms of violence, particularly on a psychological level but often outwardly as well. They are attempts to impose an external belief or code upon a person, not to help them understand their inherent divinity. They do not serve to awaken the Divine Self in people but to subordinate them to some institution or dogma instead. This violates the principle of ahimsa, or non-violence and reflects a lack of understanding of the deeper consciousness in all creatures. A truly aware soul honors the Divine in others, rather than trying to impose his or her own religion upon them, which is to insult the sacred nature of the person.

Hinduism has not sought to convert the world by preachers or by armies. It grows organically among people as part of a spiritual culture and way of life that affirms the inner truth and does not require that people abandon their native beliefs in order to follow it. Wherever Hinduism has gone, it has preserved the indigenous cultures of the people. It has sought to promote nature and the Self everywhere, to help all beings develop their inherent potential. It is concerned with a genuine spiritual development, not merely with a change of names or clothes.

Yet it is wrong to think that people cannot formally become Hindus, regardless of their land of birth. This requires a special preparation including study, meditation, and following a particular life-style and ethical discipline. It is usually not given instantaneously or overnight. Once these preliminaries are fulfilled a simple ceremony called *Shuddhi* is performed which makes one into a Hindu. There are a number of groups in India and the West who do this, though they seldom advertise or wave a flag about it.

Shuddhi means purification, not conversion. According to Hinduism we cannot be converted to anything, just as we cannot change our nature. Becoming a Hindu is not a question of becoming converted from one identity to another but of discovering what our real identity has always been. To become a Hindu all that we need to do is purify our minds and hearts, so that we can recognize our eternal being. This is not to assume a new identity but to discover the Divine within us. Such conversion does not require denying any truth. It only requires giving up exclusive beliefs that cloud our perception.

Today Hindu spiritual teachers travel all over the world to share their knowledge with disciples from all countries and religions. They have not insisted that people formally convert to Hinduism in order to benefit from their teachings or adopt its practices. Many westerners practice Yoga and

meditation, chant Om and other Hindu mantras, and visit sacred sites in India but have not had to become Hindus. This is because Hindu teachers see more value in sharing spiritual practices than in getting people to assume different identities. However, by formally becoming a Hindu one does have the additional advantage of a stronger connection to the tradition that can make its teachings and practices much more efficacious. One embraces the greater Sanatana Dharma, rather than just one branch of it.

Universality in Religion and Monotheism

Western religious thinkers generally identify universality in religion with monotheism ó the idea that there is only One God ó and hold that all truly religious people should worship this same Supreme Being. However, this insistence on monotheism is exclusive, not universal. It rejects polytheism, pantheism, monism (the idea that there is only One Reality), and other forms of spiritual experience that are common to many human beings and cultures. Extreme monotheism reduces the Divine to a single formulation, insisting on one savior, one final prophet or one book. Such a One God is not a truth of unity, which is universal, but the assertion of a single belief, which is opposed to all else. True unity is universality; it is not one thing as opposed to another, but the One that is all.

The partiality inherent in such exclusive monotheism is revealed by how it tends to denigrate all other spiritual views. It fragments itself further into warring creeds, with different monotheists fighting with each other as to whose One God, or view of the One God, is correct. Such extreme monotheism is often a religion of warlike people. It promotes conquests and aims at the building up of empires. The religion of One God becomes reflected in one state and one leader, and the denial of dissent. Not surprisingly, western monotheism has appeared historically as the religious counterpart of political imperialism. History has revealed how monotheism has been allied with invasions, colonialism and genocide, which may not be an accident but the unfortunate end result of a rigid, one-sided and ultimately violent view of the Divine.

This One God becomes an abstraction to which actual people are sacrificed. He becomes jealous and wrathful and promotes such attitudes among his followers. He is opposed to individual inquiry and experiential spirituality and insists upon his law, ritual and theology as the unquestioned truth. While this may not be the intention of the mystics in these traditions, it has often become the behavior of literal-minded followers. Such monolithic views are out of harmony with the cultural diversity of the modern world and represent a medieval and authoritarian standard.

Hinduism, on the other hand, contains the diversity needed for a global age. Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma cannot be limited to belief in One God, but it does acknowledges theism as an important approach to the spiritual life. Hinduism is a theistic religion but not exclusively so and has created a number of theistic approaches. While accepting theism as one major aspect, some Hindu groups do not regard it as the highest. Many Hindu teachings regard monism, or the idea that there is only One Truth, as the highest truth, transcending any theistic view or personal God.

Hinduism does not project a monolithic standard that discredits other views of reality. It recognizes the Divine in many names and forms, as possessing both unity and multiplicity, as both personal and impersonal. It does not see any ultimate contradiction between Divine as One and as many. It regards the many as various appearances or manifestations of the One, which is not one in the sense of one thing opposed to others but a unity that includes diversity without being limited by it.

Hindu forms of theism exist in abundance. There are Shaivite and Vaishnava forms of theism with the Supreme Divine called Shiva or Vishnu. But Hindu theism is different from western monotheism and much richer in its forms. It contains a theism of the Divine Mother, with the Goddess as the One Deity that is the creator, preserver and destroyer of all. Hindu theism is a yogic path that emphasizes

devotion to the deity and personal communion with it through meditation and samadhi. It is not a monolithic belief system but an experiential theism of the Divine Beloved.

Hinduism is noted for the complexity of its views of reality, which seem bewildering for a mind trained to think that there is only One God. Its many names and forms for the Divine, its numerous great teachers from the most ancient times to the present generation, and its many paths of Yoga encompassing all human temperaments ñ is difficult even for a broad mind to comprehend. While other religions seem to have a single strand, Hinduism appears like the tail of peacock.

Hinduism recognizes many great spiritual teachers, sages, seers, incarnations, yogis and siddhas through the millennia. There are several figures ó like Krishna and Rama, the avatars of Vishnu, or Shankaracharya, the great teacher of Advaita Vedanta ó who are particularly important but none that dominate it so exclusively as Christ, Mohammed or Buddha dominate their religions. Each region of India has its important saints and sages of recent centuries like Tulsidas and Kabir in the north, Narsi Mehta and Mira Bai in Gujarat, Nanak for Sind and Punjab, Jnaneshvar and Tukaram of Maharashtra.

Hinduism has many new sects, and does not limit itself to the teachers of the past. The Swami Narayan movement starting in Gujarat in the late eighteenth century, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement starting from Bengal in the late nineteenth century, the Arya Samaj movement founded by Swami Dayananda Sarasvati in North India in the mid-nineteenth century, are only a few of such groups that now have wide followings of their own. Overseas Hindu groups are also emerging like the Hinduism Today magazine and its mainly western devotees, a phenomenon that is bound to increase dramatically in coming years.

Many modern Hindu teachers have become known in the modern world like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Yogananda, Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Anandamayi Ma, Ammachi, Sai Baba and Shivananda. Yet they are not known as mere propagators of Hinduism but as world teachers, proponents of Yoga, meditation, and universal spiritual principles. Such spiritual teachers see themselves as part of a universal tradition, not the proponents of one particular religion against others. This is no mere accident. It is part of the universal formulation of Hinduism which is not closed along particular lines.

Freedom: the Goal of Religion

Sanatana Dharma holds that freedom or liberation is the true goal of life. True freedom is freedom from all external conditioning influences, whether of body or mind. This is the freedom of Self-realization, complete independence from time, space and karma. We are all seeking freedom. No one is happy with boundaries or limitations. No one wants to live in a small and cramped room, or have no space in which to move.

Unfortunately, we normally seek freedom in the outer world, through possessions, power or pleasure, which are all forms of bondage and limitation. Hinduism says we need to redirect this seeking of freedom within where alone it can be truly realized. Freedom is not the ability to have more things or gain more experiences but the inner fullness which no longer requires such external supports for our happiness. A universal tradition emphasizes freedom, which includes freedom from religion as well as religion as a means of gaining freedom. If we remain tied to a church, book or savior our religion has failed us, or we have failed our religion.

Hindus have complete freedom in their spiritual life. They have any number of holy books to choose from and are not required to literally believe in any one of them. They have any number of avatars and gurus to choose from, and arenít required to follow any one of them exclusively. They have their sacred sites everywhere that they live. Their spiritual practices are done in their own homes on a daily basis and require no church.

In the modern world, we pride ourselves in our freedom of choice. We can choose where to travel, where to work, what to read, and so on, but in religion we still have little choice. We may be able to choose what church to join, but how much freedom do we have to choose our relationship with God? If we want to worship the Divine as Mother, what choice do we have in Christianity, for example? We can worship Mary as the mother of Jesus but she can never be made on par with him. And how many of churches teach us to contact the Divine within ourselves as our own true being, all names, forms and institutions aside?

As part of Sanatana Dharma, Hindus are not restricted from respecting truth wherever and in whomever they see it.

Hinduism does not have any word like heretic, pagan or kafir. Hindus have never invaded any country and tried to force people to adapt their religion, nor do Hindus ever condemn anyone to eternal hell. Hinduism does not require that we all have the same view of Divinity but encourages unique and diverse views for the full unfoldment of creative intelligence. It says that there is something unique about each person, which is their special connection with the Divine, and that there should be no standardized religion for all people.

Hindus are not required to agree with one another on religious matters but are encouraged to follow their own insights. If two Hindus do not follow the same guru, worship the Divine in the same form, or study the same scripture, it is not a problem. They will not fight with or try to convert the other person. They respect their diversity as part of the great abundance of life.

Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma has developed an unparalleled freedom in the religious and spiritual realm, as western culture has done in the scientific and material realm. It would be of great benefit to humanity to combine these two forms of freedom. To the Hindu the spiritual realm is an inner universe to be explored, not merely a dogma to believe in. Hinduism provides the tools of Yoga and meditation so that we can make this exploration for ourselves.

On the other shore of the waters, in the center of the Earth, on the ridge of Heaven, greater than the great, by luminous seed having entered into the lights of the senses, the Lord of Creation stirs within the child.

Mahanarayana Upanishad I.1

There is only One Divinity hidden in all beings, who pervades all, the Self of all beings. He is the overseer of all actions, who dwells in all beings, the witness, the sole consciousness beyond all attributes.

Svetasvatara Upanishad VI.11

The Self is the Divinity that exists in all directions, born in the beginning, he moves within the child. He alone has been born and he alone will be born. He faces all creatures whose face is to every side.

Svetasvatara Upanishad II.16

Who One only like a magician rules all the worlds with his ruling powers, who One only exists in the arising and birth of all beings: those who know Him become immortal. Svetasvatara Upanishad III.1

1.6 Sanatana Dharma and the Religions of the World

As a universal tradition that honors all spiritual aspiration, Sanatana Dharma has room for all religious and all spiritual practices regardless of the time or country of their origin. Yet it does place spiritual teachings in their appropriate positions relative to the ultimate goal of Self-realization, in which alone is true liberation.

Sanatana Dharma also recognizes that much of spiritual aspiration will always remain unknown, undefined, and outside of any institutionalized structure. It values individual spiritual experience over formal religious doctrine. Wherever the universal truth is manifest, there is Sanatana Dharma, whether it is in a field of religion, art or science, or in the life of a person or community, regardless of the time, place or circumstances. Wherever the universal truth is not recognized, or where it is scaled down and limited to a particular group, book or person ó even if done in the name of God ó there Sanatana Dharma ceases to function, whatever the activity may be.

The Religions of India

India has been a great land of spirituality and mysticism since time immemorial. It is not merely a nation in the modern sense of the word but a land, a formation of Mother Earth into a cosmic culture, held together not by a force of arms but by a common spiritual aspiration. The great beings of this land have focused on the spiritual life, the development of higher consciousness as their primary pursuit, giving economic development, intellectual pursuits and religious ritual ó the primary goals of other cultures ó a secondary role. Because of the emphasis on spiritual experience in all its forms, India has promoted the idea of a universal tradition and has given birth to the greatest number of religions and the greatest diversity of spiritual teachings and yogic practices in the world.

Hinduism itself is not a single religious belief, but a harmony of different spiritual teachings that have maintained a peaceful coexistence with one another as integral parts of a universal tradition encompassing the whole of life. Hindu Dharma has not molded or forced these different teachings into uniformity. It has nurtured their diversity through a respect for all paths to the Divine. It has allowed many different sects to come into being, expressing various approaches to the inner truth.

One could divide Hinduism into a Vedic religion, a Shaiva (Shiva) religion, a Vaishnava (Vishnu) religion, a Goddess (Shakta) religion, a Ganesha religion, a solar (Saura) religion, and various local or regional systems, including new spiritual movements that have no defined affiliation. These different teachings have neither merged into one common belief, nor separated off into conflicting creeds. They have come together while maintaining their particular approaches, in the recognition that true unity includes the fullness of diversity. They have realized that the truth of any religion need not exclude the truth of others because all religions are merely aids to the unfoldment of the universal, which is the real goal and origin of all. This harmony between the different religions of Hinduism can be used as a model to integrate the different religions of the world. It would not require any religion giving up its distinctive spiritual flavor but only recognizing the validity of other approaches to the spiritual life.

Hinduismís Spread through History

Hinduism is often erroneously looked at as restricted to the subcontinent of India. However, historically Hinduism has been practiced in many parts of the world, and teachings of similar nature to Hinduism have flourished everywhere. Hinduism has never formulated itself as restricted to a particular geographical region but as relevant to all beings. Nor has it frozen itself in time. It has continued to grow and absorb additional spiritual and cultural impulses into itself, developing in an organic way.

Hinduism has spread in three main waves through history. The first occurred during ancient history and prehistory. It is difficult to define owing to its great antiquity but is clearly evidenced by the common language, culture and religion found from Bengal to Ireland among peoples speaking IndoEuropean languages. Regions of ancient Indo-European culture consist of Europe (including Greece, Rome, the ancient Germans, Celts and Slavs), Anatolia (Modern Turkey, until the Turkish invasions of the Middle Ages), Syria (the Mittani era, second millennium BC), Iraq (the Kassite Era of the second millennium BC), Armenia, Persia, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Western China (the Tarim Basin), and North India (to the Krishna river). Even South India, though its Dravidian languages do not have as simple affinity to the Sanskritic, retains a common Hindu culture with North India going back as far as any records exist.

In addition, similar practices to the Hindu can be found in all ancient cultures, including the Egyptians, Babylonians, Sumerians, Chinese and Native Americans with their common solar religions, fire offerings, and threefold social system of priests, warriors and common people. This early phase of Hinduism or Vedic culture existed from perhaps as early as 8000 BCE to as late as 500 BCE. It was the early ancient phase of Hinduism, evidenced by the *Vedas*, the oldest books in the world, but even looks to times before the current Vedic compilation was made.

The second phase involved a diversification of Sanatana Dharma, with the development of religions, philosophies, yogic, monastic and spiritual movements through Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Its main movement was to the East with Buddhism spreading to Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, and both Hinduism and Buddhism spreading to Burma, Thailand, Indochina, Indonesia, and even into Polynesia. At the same time, there was a secondary spread of dharmic teachings to the West into Central Asia, which was predominately Buddhist but had Hindu elements as well. A yet lesser diffusion occurred to Persia and Europe, mainly through various mystical movements like the Manichean.

This was the classical age of Hindu-Buddhist culture which came to dominate Asia. It began around 500 BC, overlapping with the first wave. It began to decline with the Islamic invasions of India around 700 AD and came to an end around 1500 AD with the Islamic conquest of India and Indonesia, that caused the Hindu religion to contract in order to preserve itself and which eliminated Buddhism from India as it did from Central Asia.

The third wave of Hinduism is beginning today as part of one of the most important spiritual movements of modern times, the expansion of eastern teachings throughout the world. It also shows a combination of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as aspects of Taoism or all the main Himalayan spiritual traditions. This phase began with the dissemination of Hindu teachings to the West through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vedantic influences reached many western thinkers including Goethe, Schopenhauer, Emerson and Thoreau, mainly through translations of the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*. This phase manifested in earnest with Swami Vivekanandaís first trip to the West in 1893. There are now Yoga, Vedantic, Vedic, Tantric and Buddhist centers in most countries and most major cities of the world. H.P. Blavatskyís Theosophical society represented a complementary development of dharmic ideas in new western mystical movements.

Along with this dissemination of Hindu teachings worldwide has been a modern migration of Hindus to many countries, leading to significant Hindu populations in North America, Great Britain, the Caribbean, parts of South America, Africa, Asia, Polynesia and Europe. In addition, India itself is undergoing a strong economic development that includes building many new temples and a revival of Hinduism and its rich traditions of art and culture. Combining all these factors, it is clear that Hinduism will once more be a dominant influence for the world in decades to come. Sanatana

Dharma is entering a new and perhaps greater era of flowering that can help transform life as we know it into a spiritual adventure.

Hinduism and Particular Religions BUDDHISM

Buddhism formulates itself as Buddha Dharma, ìthe way or Dharma of enlightenment.î Starting as a monastic reform movement within the field of Hindu teachings, Buddhism gradually developed a separate existence of its own apart from the common stream of Sanatana Dharma, though it never entirely gave up its roots. Indian Buddhism and its direct offshoots like Tibetan Buddhism use Sanskrit mantras, Yoga techniques, Vedic fire rituals, Ayurvedic medicine and Vedic astrology, and share a common iconography and temple worship with the Hindus. Buddhist traditions of more distant lands, like China and Japan, maintain many of these same practices but adapted to their own cultures.

Buddhism and Hinduism have much in common and their differences are often semantic or variant lines of approach. There are perhaps greater differences among teachings within each tradition than between the two, as both traditions contain considerable diversity. Tibetan Buddhism in particular shares a common iconography, mantras, Yoga practices and deities with the Hindu tradition. While Hindus and Buddhists may disagree as to the precise nature of enlightenment or liberation, not only with each other but also among themselves, they all accept spiritual realization through meditation as the goal of life.

The Buddha is not portrayed as the only Son of God, the last prophet, or the only Buddha. He is simply the main representative of enlightenment in this era, the ideal sage. He is often regarded more as an inner archetype than an historical person. There are said to be Buddhas teaching in all worlds, not just this Earth. Previous Buddhas are recognized and many of these, like the Buddha Kashyapa, which is the name of one of the seven seers of the *Vedas*, have the names of great Hindu sages. Hindus recognize Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu and Buddhists recognize the Hindu avatar Rama as a Bodhisattva or enlightened being. There are many sages and yogis honored in both traditions. Sanatana Dharma or the eternal tradition can be called Buddha Dharma or the enlightenment tradition.

JAINISM

Jainism is another great religion of India that did not entirely merge into the common fold of Sanatana Dharma, though it has become closer to Hinduism than Buddhism has. Mahatma Gandhi has been called the greatest modern Jain, for his championing of non-violence, though he was actually a Hindu. The Jains base their teachings on various Tirthankaras, who like Buddhas, are great enlightened teachers going back to ancient times. Jains have similar yogic values and practices as other Hindu and Buddhist teachings. In fact, much that is regarded as typically Buddhist, like the emphasis on nonviolence, karma, and the rejection of a personal God, were originally Jain teachings, which predate the Buddhist by some centuries.

Jainism can also be seen as an aspect of Sanatana Dharma, not a separate religion. The Jains have included some of the greatest minds of India, including poets, mathematicians, astronomers and philosophers. Many Jains consider themselves to be part of the greater Hindu culture in India.

THE SIKHS

The Sikhs were originally a sect of the Hindus. It was a custom to make the eldest son into a Sikh or a defender of the faith. This was to counter the Islamic invaders who tried to force conversion upon the people of India. The Sikhs arose as defenders of Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma against this Islamic invasion from Central Asia.

Some modern Sikhs consider that they have a separate religion outside of Hinduism. However, if we examine the sacred books of the Sikhs we find that they are filled with references to Hindu names for God, like Ram and Hari, and Hindu holy books, like the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, and are composed

by various saints and sages, like Nanak, who are equally revered by the Hindus. Sikh holy books are written in the language, of Gurumukhi that has much in common with Sanskrit. Many Sikhs still consider themselves to be a sect of the Hindus and hold to the idea of Sanatana Dharma.

Some people think that the Sikhs combined Hinduism and Islam, which is another misunderstanding. Sikh holy books have very few references to Islam, Allah or Mohammed. The Sikhs fought against the Muslims and were their main opponents in northwest India. However, the Sikhs like the Hindus accepted Muslims into their culture if they were peaceful and they respected the spiritual traditions of Islam, like Sufism.

TAOISM

Taoism is a Chinese tradition, yet there were considerable contacts between Taoism and India, and both arose in the Himalayan region. Buddhism and Taoism in China influenced each other considerably and often merged into a single teaching. Hinduism had contact with Taoism from a preBuddhist era, which was maintained throughout the Buddhist era.

Taoism can also be considered to be a dharmic tradition. It has its yogic and meditation practices much like the Hindu and Buddhist, and many Taoists accept karma and rebirth. Like the Vedic tradition, Taoism looks back to an earlier enlightened age of humanity before what we know of as civilization began. Like Hinduism, Taoism is a religion of life and nature that seeks to grow organically. It does not proselytize or seek converts. It has no dogma or ideology and promotes a universality of vision. Like Hinduism it has its folk religion of various Gods, Goddesses and nature spirits, with a similar form of temple worship being offered to them.

The Shinto religion of Japan, which has much in common with Taoism, and has also become intertwined with Buddhism, can similarly be regarded as part of the eastern dharmic traditions.

ZOROASTRIANISM

The Zoroastrian or ancient Persian religion still survives in India as the Parsees, who took refuge in India in the eighth century after the Islamic conquest of Persia. Their religion is similar to the Vedic in terms of language, concepts and practices, particularly in its emphasis on fire worship, and can be counted as another dharmic tradition.

Zoroastrianism also had a strong influence on the Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians and Muslims and brought many Vedic ideas to them. Even medieval European mystical movements often looked to Zoroaster as a great spiritual master. The influence of Zoroastrianism spread as far east as China. Western India was often under Persian rulership in ancient times and brought about yet a further exchange of ideas and practices.

PAGAN RELIGIONS

The pagan religions of Greece and Rome, and those of the ancient Celts, Germans, Slavs and Baltic peoples (Lithuanians and Latvians) have much in common with the Hindu, particularly through their similar Indo-European languages and cultures. The ancient Greek culture has many affinities with that of ancient India. Both had temple worship of Gods and Goddesses, many with common names or characteristics, elaborate mythological systems, deep philosophical traditions and a love of astrology. Much of this older European religion can be better understood through looking at Hinduism.

A study of Hinduism ó where these traditions are still alive ó can aid in the restoration of this older European tradition in which many of the keys to western mysticism, Goddess worship, spiritual art, philosophy and science lay hidden and ready to return. This same Hindu type worship of Gods and Goddesses, temples, magic and mysticism can be found among the Egyptians and Babylonians and many other ancient peoples. Hinduism as the best surviving religion from that most ancient period

can help us understand and recreate other ancient traditions from throughout the world.

While Christianity looks down upon pagan religions, we should note that Christian theology and philosophy relies heavily on Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, who were pagan philosophers. The philosophy, medicine and science of both Christianity and Islam has a pagan Greek basis from which came modern science and most of modern European intellectual culture, art and poetry. Science and its empiricism developed from a pagan basis, reflecting the concern of indigenous traditions with understanding of the world of Nature. Pagan cultures are not simply primitive but capable of great spiritual, philosophical, and scientific sophistication.

JUDAISM

Judaism as an ancient religion resembles Hinduism in a number of respects. Ancient Judaism employed similar fire offerings as the Vedic religion. Its emphasis on Torah or the law is similar to the Hindu emphasis on Dharma. Judaism has actively promoted mysticism in its Kabalistic tradition. Some Jewish mystics teach karma and rebirth and promote yogic like teachings and practices.

The Jewish people like the Hindus practice religious tolerance, not promoting conversion, viewing religion as a culture and way of life, not merely a belief system. They have never sent armies on crusades and holy wars or sought to impose their religion on others by the force of arms or propaganda. The Jewish people respect other religions and do not claim that theirís is the only true religion.

Historically, there was an on-going trade between ancient Israel and India through the Phoenicians as early as the reign of King Solomon. During the second millennium BC Syria was under the rule of the Mittani, an Indo-European people worshipping Vedic Gods that had contact with the Jewish kingdoms as well. This means that the connections between India and Israel are quite old. The main difference between Hinduism and Judaism is theological, with Judaism being opposed to the use of images that most Hindus follow. However, there are Hindu groups, like the Arya Samaj, who also do not use images.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity in its early days exhibited a degree of mysticism and a practice of non-violence that may derive from a yogic influence. There are stories that Christ came to India to study during his lost years, or that he retired to India after the crucifixion and died in Kashmir at a very old age. There is an additional story that St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, and sometimes called the brother of Jesus, died in India. We are not certain how true all this may be and much exaggeration may be there. Yet for certain we do know that India admitted Christian refugees into the country as early as the fourth century AD, giving them a land to practice their religion without persecution.

Hindu and Buddhist ideas spread to into ancient Greece and Rome long before Christianity. Greek and Roman philosophers studied the teachings of India and some visited there. Indian traders had their colonies in the Greco-Roman world including at Alexandria, a tradition going back to earlier eras of ancient Egypt and Babylonia. Some of the early mystical traditions of Christianity, and others in the greater Greco-Roman world, accept karma and rebirth and a seeking of Self-knowledge. However, with the development of Christianity as a government promoted religious institution in the Roman Empire gradually opposed and restricted these yogic like elements which were soon marginalized. The early Church formally rejected the doctrine of rebirth as heresy and along with it many eastern influences were suppressed.

Christianity alone of the main western religions developed monastic orders like the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. This is true not only of the Catholic, but of the Greek Orthodox and other eastern churches, though the Protestants of later times rejected them. The robes, rosaries and use of statues in

ecclesiastical Christian orders reflect the older practices of Hindu and Buddhist monks.

Trade between India and Europe continued through the Middle Ages up to the time of the Turkish conquest of Constantinople (the fifteenth century). Columbus journeyed to America seeking India, searching for an alternative sea route as the land route was closed by the Turks. Not surprisingly, great medieval Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen arose in the Rhineland region, noted as the end point of the trade route with the East. No doubt spiritual ideas came along with the trade. There is a possible Hindu and Vedantic influence on Christianity into the Renaissance, when thinkers like Marcilio Ficino mention Hindu teachings with respect.

However, Hinduism and Christianity can be very different in their teachings, with the Hindu approach being inclusive and Christianity exclusive. Catholicism, though having a mystical and devotional side like the Hindu, has an authoritarian structure and missionary militancy quite different than the diversity and tolerance of Hinduism. Catholic theology through St. Thomas Aquinas is different than Vedanta, not teaching any Atman or higher Self, any Brahman or Absolute, or karma and rebirth. Protestant Christianity is yet more removed from Hinduism than is the Catholic. Like Islam, it is against all use of images and generally anti-mystical, emphasizing the authority of the book over inner experience.

Naturally, as long as Christian missionary activity and its propaganda is directed against Hindu Dharma, it is difficult for Hindus to respect Christianity as a whole, however much they may appreciate certain Christian mystics or the figure of Christ himself.

ISLAM AND SUFISM

Long before the advent of Islam, Arabia had received a considerable influence from Hinduism and Buddhism. Hindu traders lived in Mecca and contributed to the culture and welfare of the city. The Pre-Islamic religion of Arabia, like the Pre-Christian religions of the Middle East and Europe, resembled the Hindu, using a multiplicity of names and forms for the Divine. Mecca was a site where the Goddess was worshipped and contained 360 icons, following a solar symbolism. The three great Goddesses of Al-Allat, Al-Uzza and Al-Manat were most famous. The stone of Mecca is an ancient sacred stone much like the Shiva lingas or Shiva stones of Hindu worship. Islam discarded most of this earlier type of worship but its imprint in the psyche of the region still remains.

The first part of India to come under Islamic influence was the province of Sind, by the mouth of the Indus River. From there mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and other arts and sciences better developed in India were taken back to the Middle East as, for example, the Hindu decimal system that the Arabs introduced into Europe. Vedantic teachings were adopted by Sufis, the mystics of Islam, who are defined even today by the *Dictionary of Islam* in India as Muslims following Vedantic ideas.

Afghanistan and Central Asia came under Islamic influence in the period around 700-1000 AD. These were originally regions of Buddhist and Hindu predominance and preserved aspects of these older teachings. Even today many Sufis look to this mountain area as their holy land, particularly eastern Afghanistan and its portion of the Himalayas, which links them back to the greater Himalayan tradition. Some nonIslamic groups have survived in the Middle East, like the Druze in Lebanon and the Yazidis in Iraq, whose traditions have connections to India and follow ideas like that of rebirth, showing other religious trends like Hinduism from the Middle East.

However, Hinduism and Islam are generally opposite religions in orientation, with Hinduism presenting the diversity and creativity of the tropical jungle and Islam the stern absolutism of the desert. Islamic rulers in India were largely intolerant of Hindu Dharma, taxed Hindus heavily and prevented them from building or renovating temples. Islamic armies destroyed Hindu temples in great numbers, sometimes building mosques upon Hindu temples or out of temple materials. These events

were lauded in Islamic historical accounts and in Islamic poetry as well. There were exceptions like the Emperor Akbar and Prince Dara, son of Shah Jahan, who were more tolerant. Unfortunately, their influence remained limited.

Even the Sufis have had among them teachers who were militant and anti-Hindu in their views and actions. This means that Hindus cannot uncritically embrace the Sufis, though there are many points of connection with them. As long as Hindus are the targets of Islamic conversion efforts, just as the case with Christian conversion efforts, it is difficult for them to forget the history of Islamic aggression against them. Hindus will identify more with the pre-Islamic religion of Arabia that followed a Hindu style of image worship.

Dharmic and Belief-Oriented Religions

There are two general types of religions in the world. The first are belief-oriented religions centered on a particular teacher and an exclusive formulation of the Divine through a particular book or scripture. Most typical in this respect are Christianity and Islam in their predominant and orthodox lines. These religions have an historical revelation, a time bound vision of their mission and insist upon the same belief system for all human beings. They are strongly monotheistic and recognize only one life for the soul followed by an eternal heaven or hell. They tend to be aggressive, proselytizing and militant. They impose their beliefs upon existent cultures and either subordinate or destroy them in the process.

The second type consists of religions that arise from nature, which include indigenous, tribal and native traditions. They have many names and forms of the Divine, with no set dogma or seeking of converts. Such groups include the native and tribal beliefs of Africa, Asia and America, and the pagan religions of Europe. These religions are connected to nature and to the Earth, and are overall peaceful and passive. They are part of an organic unfoldment of life, not the imposition of an ideology or dogma upon it. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Taoism belong to this category as they have an organic basis, emphasize meditation experience rather than belief, and have a great respect for nature and the sacredness of all life.

These native spiritual cultures breathe the cycles of eternity and are not based upon any historical revelation. They are interwoven with the culture of the people and must be taken up as part of the whole way of life. They aim at an inner experience, a greater awareness of both the cosmos and oneself. They often believe in rebirth or reincarnation. They contain experiential traditions of Yoga, shamanism, dance and chanting, and knowledge of higher states of consciousness, both occult and spiritual.

Judaism contains aspects of the second type of religions as it is rooted in a people and a culture, and not seeking world domination. Liberal and mystical aspects of Christianity and Islam can have features of the second type, though their majority groups are mainly of the first.

Of the nature based traditions, Hinduism, which integrates together the indigenous religions of Southeast Asia, is the largest, best organized and best preserved. Therefore, Hinduism can provide a key to the preservation of these organic religions and show us their relevance as part of a universal tradition of global spirituality.

Today, with a new interest in mythology and shamanism, we are rediscovering the validity of native religions and their spiritual practices. We are finding in the native religions of Africa and America much psychological sophistication and the greater connection with nature that we all need in this ecological age. Unfortunately, most of these native cultures have been overrun if not destroyed, and those few which are left are fighting for their existence.

Christianity and Islam spread historically mainly by converting people from their indigenous

beliefs, teaching them that their indigenous religions and the culture on which they are based, are wrong, inferior or evil. Hinduism, on the contrary, teaches people to preserve their indigenous customs and beliefs, to cherish their native heritage, not simply on a mundane level but as a spiritual path. Hindus are seeking to help such indigenous cultures revive themselves and flourish in the modern world. Those following native traditions should examine Hinduism and form a common alliance with it. Those seeking to preserve indigenous religions and native cultures will find a common cause with the Hindus.

A Hindu Critique of Religion

Though Hinduism finds an affinity with the mystical traditions of Christianity and Islam, it cannot accept the exclusivism that occurs in these religions. Vedanta can also be critical of other religious philosophies and theologies on a number of important points, particularly where they fail to understand the higher levels of consciousness and universal laws like karma and rebirth. Even within Vedanta there are several systems of philosophy, dualistic and non-dualistic (Dvaita and Advaita), which have a history of respectful debate and disagreement.

Hinduism is not afraid of criticism by other religions, which it has received in abundance. It is not restricted to a particular revelation, person or historical time period that prevents it from growing and developing over time. Hindu teachers are willing to listen to criticism from other religious beliefs, and change their teachings if is found to be correct. Hindu Dharma is ever renewing itself through time and not confined to any single formulation.

Hinduism recognizes an evolution of religion and consciousness, with the ability of people today to make religious teachings more relevant, or invent new religions that may be better or more useful than the old. Hinduism views past religion as the ground on which to build our own unique spiritual realization. The past should neither be blindly worshipped nor casually discarded. We should not limit ourselves to the past, but use it carefully as a resource for our own development today.

Above all, Hinduism cannot accept religious divisions as real. Truth, after all is One. This means that there are no separate religious compartments that we belong to, Hinduism for the Hindus, Christianity for the Christians, and so on. The law of karma and the seeking of Self-realization are common to all souls. *No soul is born into any religion. All souls are born into the Dharma, not into religions that are man made.*

In Sanatana Dharma, like science, truth is a matter of reason and perception. Truth is a universal fact that each objective observer can discover by probing to the depths of his or her own psyche. We must question and examine all that we call religion in the fire of inquiry. Otherwise we are not searching out the truth but merely attempting to uphold various vested interests in the outer world. This means that people of all religions must come together and question what religion and spirituality really are, even if it requires questioning our own traditions and abandoning those aspects of them which fail to reflect the truth.

There is no reason for us to feel offended if our religious beliefs are questioned. If they are true, like the heat of fire, any objective examination will affirm them. If they are not true, like fire being wet, we have lost nothing in discarding a false belief. In this respect, a universal tradition must include deep questioning in order to be valid. Let all doubts be brought out. But let us question in order to find out what is true, not merely to refute or uphold one belief or another. The ultimate truth is beyond all beliefs, theories, names and forms. It is our own inner nature divested of limiting concepts and conditioned thoughts.

Hinduism does not regard it important or wise for any religion to insist upon a separate identity ó that human beings should consider themselves to be really limited to one religious camp or another.

There is a common humanity and common spiritual striving for all. Yet there is nothing wrong with the idea that our path is best for us, if it is accompanied by openness, tolerance and respect for the views of others who have different views. It becomes a problem when it is associated with militancy and the attempt to impose our view upon others, when it becomes self-righteous.

Hinduism does not see it as a sign of greatness if all the people in a particular country belong to the same religion, follow the same prophet, read the same holy book, or perform the same prayers. Hindus would consider it a sign of spiritual poverty. It would be as if the people in a country all wore the same style of clothes, produced the same style of art, ate the same food, and all tried to look like each other.

Hinduism states that the religions we know of are not separate or self-contained entities. They are best aspects of a greater universal religion. Let us accept all great teachers and teachings and integrate them together into a universal science of Self-realization. Let nothing of any real spiritual aspiration in humanity be rejected wherever it might occur. Let no real spiritual aspiration be destroyed in the name of conformity to a belief. As human beings we should all share our spiritual knowledge, not to convert others, but to unite with the infinite.

From non-being lead us to Being, from darkness lead us to Light, from death lead us to Immortality.
Brihadaranyaka Upanishad I.3.28

I was the father of the human race and I became the Sun. Vamadeva, Rig Veda, IV.27.1

All this in the beginning was God. It knew itself as ìI am God.î Therefore it became all. Whoever among the Gods, seers or men has awakened to That, he also became That.
Brihadaranyaka Upanishad I.IV.10

1.7 Idolatry and Dogmatism: The Veils of Maya

The main charge that Biblical traditions have made against Hinduism and other non-biblical traditions is that of idolatry ó that Hindus worship Gods and Goddesses other than the One True God and are therefore making a great error or committing a great sin. On the other hand, the main charge that people outside the Biblical religions make against them in turn is that of exclusivism ó that they are trying to impose an arbitrary set of beliefs upon all people, which favors one group over another and leads to oppression, exploitation and genocide such as history has often recorded.

There is no doubt that we should question our attachment to the outer world of name and form and missing our connection with the Divine. We should not worship the false Gods of material forms and transient enjoyments. Yet when religion mistakes that inner Divine reality for a particular belief, it becomes guilty of the same outwardness it is criticizing under the charge of idolatry. It becomes dogmatic, which is another form of false worship, or trying to limit truth, which is infinite, to a particular fixed form in time and space.

To insist that God should only have one name or be worshipped in only one manner indicates ignorance of the unlimited nature of truth. True religion shows us the limitations of our outward seeking but it does not seek to impose an outer standard on our inner search. The search for the infinite and eternal cannot be limited by any social, emotional or intellectual formulation. There can be no outer group that owns or dispenses the inner truth, as if it were a limited material or intellectual commodity. Such so-called religion is not a seeking of the universal and eternal, but the assertion of a personal point of view that divides humanity into hostile camps.

Idolatry charges people with regarding as Divine some material thing like a stone, a piece of wood, or a picture. Yet even the so-called primitive savage knows that his idol is not the real deity he worships but only a means of communication with it. The core problem behind all human problems is

materialism, regarding something other than the Divine as reality ó valuing money, sex, power, or any other outer object over the spiritual being or pure consciousness underlying the universe. In Hinduism, this belief in the reality of something other than God or the Self is called ignorance (avidya).

Sanatana Dharma teaches that we should regard the Divine as the true reality and honor everything as sacred. We should not grant reality to anything apart from its Divine essence. This, however, is a matter of inner discrimination, not a simple process of banning of the use of images in religious worship. The Divine dwells in all beings. What is important is to honor the Divine in all things, rather than going after each object as having its own independent value.

Hinduism and Idolatry

As a universal tradition, Hindu Dharma has a place for all forms of worship from the most basic rituals to the highest meditation. This includes worship both with and without form ó whatever may be helpful for different people. Hinduism employs abundant forms as well as every sort of formless approach. Most Hindus do use images in their religious worship and most Hindu temples contain many of these, particularly in the form of statues. But this does not prevent Hindus from honoring the Divine beyond form as BeingConsciousness-Bliss (Sat-chit-ananda).

This abundance of forms has been criticized by aniconic (anti-idolatry) traditions as the idol worship of primitive people. The idea is that whoever uses images in religious worship is somehow unethical, perhaps a worshipper of the devil, and does not know there is only One God. Image worshippers may be lumped together with criminals, perverts, or whoever at the moment is regarded as representing deviant behavior in society, as if the use of images led to moral depravity and every other sort of human failing.

Such intolerant ideas are prejudice, if not bigotry, and are akin to racism and its negative stereotypes. People who hold to them never take the time to communicate with so-called idolaters and find out what they are really worshipping, to discover that they are also human beings often with more love and tolerance than the religious zealots who attack them. Not surprisingly, the charge of idolatry is often leveled as part of a campaign of conversion, invasion and conquest. It has been used as an excuse for smashing statues, robbing and demolishing temples, for plunder and genocide, all conveniently done in the name of God. Such a God is but a personification of intolerance and his worship is built on the blood of innocent people. There is nothing wrong if a religion wants to build its approach to the Divine apart from image worship. But to denigrate and attack those who use images has nothing holy about it.

Western missionaries through time, and Christian fundamentalists today, have used a charge of idolatry to misrepresent Hinduism and other pagan religions. They never mention that the images are looked upon only as vehicles or communication devices, not as real in themselves. Their statements would be equivalent to Hindus calling Christianity a religion of human sacrifice owing to the Holy Communion ritual of drinking the blood and eating the body of Christ.

Hindus use a variety of images in their religious worship, which include statues and pictures of deities, great teachers and avatars. Hindu worship consists of burning incense, lighting lamps, reciting prayers, chanting and singing devotional songs around these sacred images, including rituals in which the statue may be bathed, fed or dressed. Yet Hindus also worship symbolic and geometric forms, like yantras and mandalas. They honor sacred places in nature like mountains, rivers and lakes. In Sanatana Dharma, all things in the universe are objects of worship as the Divine presence pervades all life.

Hindu images of Gods and Goddesses have supernatural characteristics to show their higher

reality. Deities may be depicted with several heads, many arms, and various unusual weapons and adornments. Sometimes they may have animal characteristics, like an animal head or body. Sometimes they are shown with frightening features as in the form of wrathful protective deities. Such forms may appear strange to those who come from anti-idolatry traditions. However, to a deeper vision ó which anyone can come to by a little open-minded study ó these images are great archetypes of life, embodiments of the great truths of the eternal and the infinite, in which our ordinary mental constructs must be broken down. Those who make the charge of idolatry against these uses of images only demonstrate their ignorance of symbolic language and mythology. Not surprisingly, anti-image traditions are often opposed to mysticism and have stifled artist expression as well.

Such a worshipper of images was Paramahansa Ramakrishna, whom many westerners have been inspired by. Ramakrishna was a priest at a Hindu temple and worshipped the Goddess Kali, who has a terrible form replete with an outstretched tongue, serpents as adornments, and a garland of skulls, as she represents the Eternal Mother who stands beyond all the limitations of time and death. Let those who are opposed to the use of images show among their members an individual of such spiritual realization of Ramakrishna.

We should note that religions which use images have not historically been more violent or sensual than those that deny them. Hindu and Buddhist communities contain a strong ascetic tradition, as well as an emphasis on non-violence, even though these they use images. Image-denying religions, on the other hand, have often been guilty of violence and destruction perpetuated in the name of destroying idols and converting heathens and infidels. The non-use of images has not increased our human sensitivity or respect for other cultures.

Icons and Idols

All religions use images and forms to some degree. Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christianity have many images, icons and statues as an examination of their churches reveals. Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Shinto groups use them as well. Native American, African and Asian religions all have them, often in forms that we may find hard to understand. The ancient religions of the entire world from Mexico to Greece, Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, India and China used images extensively, as archeology so clearly has uncovered. The use of images is an integral part of human religious practices and no universal religion can be regarded as complete without them.

Most Protestants and Muslims do not use any images and accuse the Catholics of idolatry for their use of them. No statues or images can be found adorning their churches or mosques. Yet we do find that many Protestants have a picture of Christ or at least wear a cross, which is still a usage of images and symbols. Muslims worship Mecca and a special rock placed there. They pray only in the direction of Mecca, which is the limitation of the Divine to a place. Muslims often have pictures of their religious or political leaders in their homes or offices. Shia Muslims have pictures of Ali, the grandson of Mohammed, though they do not allow pictures of Mohammed. Both Protestants and Muslims regard their holy books, the Bible and Koran, as the Word of God. This is also a worship of objects.

However, there is a strange dichotomy in how religious images are judged. When they are part of the Christian tradition, they are called ëiconsí and classified as works of art and sacred in nature. However, when they are part of nonChristian or pagan traditions they are called ëidolsí, a derogatory term that indicates not the sacred but mere superstition. In the case of Native American and African images, even when done by a culture as advanced as the Mayas of Central America that built great pyramids and had many large cities, they are lumped along with so-called ëprimitiveí art.

By this logic what makes for idolatry is not the use of representational forms in worship, but only

the use of nonChristian images, which is obviously a prejudice. An image of Krishna as the good cow herder is on par with that of Christ as the good shepherd, the Divine as the caretaker of souls. To make one into a superstitious idol and the other into a sacred image is hypocritical and intolerant. It is like saying that only spices used in American cooking are legitimate spices, while those used in Indian cooking are food adulterants!

What Christian would accept a depiction of Christ being called an idol? Would Christian religious leaders approve of it in the press or mass media of Christian countries? Yet Hindus and other non-Christians routinely are made to accept that depictions of their deities ó who represent such high truths as Self-realization ó are demeaned as idols, which is how news groups still call them today.

To call such images idols implies that those who worship them take the image itself as a God. This adds yet more prejudice and error to the judgment. The use of an image ó whether we call it an icon or an idol ó does not imply belief in the reality of the image. That we keep a photograph of our wife and children by our office desk does not mean that we think our wife and children are the photograph!

The use of the term idol further inflames the sentiments of anti-idolatry religions like Christianity and Islam, as both the Bible and the Koran in places instruct their followers to destroy idolaters and their temples. The use of the term idol in the media is careless, insensitive and inflammatory. It should be removed in an effort to promote understanding and good will between religious groups.

Idolatry and the Book

One may confuse the Divine which is unlimited with any number of limited things, not merely representational forms. Books can also be invested with the illusion that they are the truth. The written word is arguable the foremost of all false Gods, the confusion of spirit and matter, because as the most evident form used in human communication, it is the foundation for many other dogmatic constructs. The idolatry or blind worship of the word, idea, name or book, is perhaps the worst of all prejudices. It confuses reality with a verbal representation, which is worse than mistaking God for an idol.

Verbal constructs are less real than ordinary realities. For example, the word tree is less real than an actual tree. So too, the word God is not only less real than God, but less real than an actual object. It is less real than even one human being. To sacrifice one living human being for such a mere concept is not only a sin against God, but a sin against life. To identify God or truth with a particular name or phrase is to fall not only from spiritual reality but to alienate ourselves from the world of nature. For this reason, Vedic texts emphasize that truth is found where all speech turns back and is different than anything in this world which people can perceive as an object. Many religious groups insist that their book is literally the word of God. They have identified Godís word with a material thing, a mere book. How can the infinite and eternal reality have speech or words? God is not a physical person who has a mouth. His Word is at best a metaphor for the cosmic creative intelligence. This Divine Word is a vibratory state of awareness, not something that can be found in a dictionary or made into a dialect.

To regard an actual book as the word of God is a form of matter worship. This worship of a book creates literalism, taking all statements, however metaphorical, as actual facts: like the belief that the world was created six thousand years ago because this is the literal age of the lineages of the prophets given in the Bible since the time of creation. It creates dogma ó the idea that something is true merely because it is found in a book that is said to be the Word of God.

A book itself does not say anything. It has to be read and interpreted. Usually any book is capable

of various interpretations. Scriptures, which are written in archaic and symbolic languages, and often reflect many authors, time periods and points of view, are capable of many interpretations as is obvious by the disagreements between Biblical scholars. A book is a passive object which if used properly can yield knowledge, but if used improperly can yield half-truth or falsehood. We can compare a book to a musical instrument. The person who plays it is as important as the instrument itself.

Emotion in the Depiction of the Divine

The Biblical and Koranic God, though regarded as beyond representation, is often portrayed as possessing human emotions. He is said to be jealous, vindictive, wrathful or vengeful. He has his favorite or chosen prophets and people that he blesses with favors and miracles, as well as his enemies whom he punishes with natural disasters like plagues, floods and earthquakes. He interferes with human affairs and political matters, functioning as a judge noting the good and evil of people, dispensing rewards and punishments of the most extreme type.

Such a God appears as a person with common and not entirely noble human feelings. He appears as a personification of anger and wrath, or as representing the ego of certain groups of people. Such a God appears to be the confusion of the Divine with a particular mental or emotional formation, which is material and transient. It is very convenient to put God on our side and make those who think differently than us into followers of the Devil, but there is nothing particularly sensitive or humane about it.

The Divine as a transcendent reality no more possesses anger and jealousy and is no more a judge than he is a person with hands and feet. If one rejects the idea that God can have any image or human representation, then certainly God cannot have any human emotions or partialities either. Therefore, God can have no only Son, final prophet, or one scripture, as these are all material limitations that no spiritual reality can be attributed to.

Yet if God can metaphorically be described in symbols and images, his traits can be metaphorically described through emotions. Saying that God is jealous can be a metaphor for indicating that only the eternal endures and whatever transient thing we are attached to must be taken away from us by the force of time. To say that God is a stern judge can be a metaphor for saying that the law of karma, which is a product of Divine wisdom and natural law, is the real giver of good or bad results, which cannot be altered by human wishes. Such metaphors should never be taken literally or we lose their real meaning.

Hindu thought also uses emotional symbolism in its depictions. Hindu deities like Shiva and his wife Parvati have fierce forms and powerful emotional expressions to express their transcendence of the human condition and its dualities of high and low, good and evil, but these are not meant to be taken literally. And they are never made the basis of holy wars and destruction of temples in the name of religion.

Art and the Use of Religious Images

The use of images is part of an artistic approach to the Divine, is part of what we could call the ëYoga of artí. For this purpose, sculpture uses statues, painting uses colored surfaces, music uses sound, and poetry uses verbal images. To deny these things as idolatry is only to banish art and beauty from our relationship with the Divine. For this reason, anti-image traditions have generally remained artistically limited. Where for example can we find great religious sculpture or painting among orthodox Muslims or strict Protestants?

Both the Bible and the Koran, though they reject graven images, abound with poetic images, which are responsible for much of the beauty of these books. If a poetic image is acceptable, why is a

formal image not allowed? Is not a picture worth a thousand words? Why is a poetic form of art allowed as religious but not a plastic form like painting or sculpture? It could be argued that the literalism of certain religious traditions in worshipping their books has only occurred because they deny the use of images. The book becomes a substitute image to fill the aspect of spiritual aspiration that looks for a symbolic object to worship.

The religious traditions that reject the use of images only make themselves incapable of representing the full spiritual aspirations of humanity, which must include all forms of sacred art. Hinduism as a universal tradition includes all forms of art as valid approaches to the Divine. It contains music, dance, poetry, drama, sculpture, painting and architecture, not as ends-in-themselves but as different languages of worship. Yet this has not prevented it from having formless approaches as well, with a worship of the Absolute beyond all time, space and person that it has developed to a degree largely unparalleled in anti-image traditions.

Idolatry and Dogmatism

There have been many great teachers throughout the world over the course of time. The higher truth can never be limited to a single person, however great he or she may be. To insist that God has only one son or that he has a final prophet is itself a form of idolatry ó an attempt to limit ultimate reality to what is only an appearance in time and space. We are all sons of God and all potentially God-realized sages. Whatever good or evil that has ever existed in any human being exists in each one of us. Whatever greatness that has existed in any human being is also part of our potential. There is no special prophet, messenger or incarnation that is apart from who we really are.

Vedanta holds that the individual is the most important thing. The teacher is only an aid and a guide to our own Selfrealization. Hinduism does not sacrifice the sacred nature of the individual for any final prophet or savior, however great, but directs each one of us to our own Self-realization as the highest goal. When we set up something outside ourselves as the truth, we fall from the spiritual path, and end up creating a cult, an illusion that blinds us to the inner reality.

The very religious groups who have most condemned other beliefs as idolaters have themselves been the most guilty of dogmatism, of an authoritarian insistence upon the sole truth of a belief that does not allow any objective examination, much less any other point of view. For this reason, they have tended to suppress any criticism of their views, which they make true on the grounds of faith alone. Dogmatic beliefs use the specter of idolatry to condemn those who think differently. But their dogmatism itself is a form of materialism, the limitation of truth to a particular form, person or idea.

Exclusivism in religious belief ó the belief our God, savior or holy book alone is true ó is itself materialism, the limitation of truth to a construct in the realm of time and space. It holds an inherent violence of partiality and intolerance. Unless we transcend the spiritual materialism of religious exclusivism, we are only following a divisive creed which breeds conflict and can never lead to peace.

We must honor all the various ways that human beings have used to approach the Divine, the infinite and eternal, and allow for their free exploration, which must overflow the boundaries of any particular religion, whether it use images or not. We are not puerile children that religion must threaten or cajole to keep in line. We are intelligent beings, centers of cosmic awareness, with the potentials of the entire universe. If we treat ourselves like animals to be herded in a particular way, we only stifle our deeper consciousness. However, if we recognize our true Self and provide it a rich field in which to grow and the freedom to discover the truth, then there is no limit as to how much each individual can flower in truth. This requires faith in the Divine as dwelling in human beings, not in God as apart from ourselves, who being separate from us can never truly uplift us.

Part II
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

A single wheel revolves with a single rim, with an unlimited number of spokes moving both before and behind. With half of itself it generated the universe. Where has its other half gone?

Atharva Veda X.9.7

Encompassing all beings, all worlds, and all directions of space, approaching the original being of Truth, with the Self he entered into the Self.

Going around Heaven and Earth in an instant, going around all the worlds, the directions, and the enlightened realms, breaking the extended line of karma, he saw That, he became That, he was That.

Shukla Yajur Veda XXXII.11-12

The infinite Mother is Heaven. The infinite Mother is the Earth. She is the Mother, the Father and the Son. The Infinite Mother is all the Gods and the five peoples of humanity. She is all that has been born and all that will be born.

Rig Veda I.89.10

Questions 1 Sanatana Dharma and the Spiritual Life

In this section, we will examine the issues of religion and spirituality, faith and enlightenment, and how they appear from a universal perspective as provided by the tradition of Sanatana Dharma.

A. Sanatana Dharma and Religion

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF SANATANA DHARMA?

Sanatana Dharma, which means the eternal tradition, has no specific origin in time. Its origin coincides with the beginning of the universe itself. Sanatana Dharma as the universal religion arises anew with each cycle of creation, being inherent in the very laws of existence.

Because it has been formulated in terms of Sanatana Dharma, there is no specific point in history when we can say that the Hindu tradition began. Nor can we rigidly delineate the forms of Hinduism from those of other religions, which being products of time must also rest on the eternal. As not having an origin, Hinduism has no end either. It does not look to any end of the world or last judgment. It will continue in one form or another throughout the future of this and all other possible worlds.

Sanatana Dharma is based upon universal principles like the law of karma, which are true in all places and all times. Though its names and forms may vary, its principles or dharmas are unchanging and must be rediscovered by all creatures in every world. The origin of the true Dharma is within us. It is the root of our deepest thoughts and the basis of our highest aspirations.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF SANATANA DHARMA?

The goal of the universal tradition is Self-realization, the realization that the entire universe dwells within our hearts, in the deepest level of consciousness that transcends time and space. The goal of universal truth is to become one with it, which is to become one with all. This state of unity is liberation from all bondage based upon fear and desire and the dualities that arise from attraction and repulsion. If we are one with all, what else could exist for us to fear or to desire?

Actually this goal of Sanatana Dharma is ever realized because the universe is inherently one with our inmost nature. To reach this goal is to recognize its self-existent reality, which is to merge in the ocean of unlimited Being-ConsciousnessBliss. It is liberation from all bondage and sorrow, not simply knowing God but merging into the Divine within us.

Yet beside its ultimate goal, Sanatana Dharma recognizes all the other legitimate goals of the universal manifestation, which is the organic unfoldment the various potentials of all worlds and creatures. While this process leads to the ultimate goal of Self-realization, each stage has its appropriate place, displaying the full beauty and glory of existence.

WHAT IS GOD OR THE DIVINE?

God is the term most often used in western religious thought to describe the Supreme Being or spiritual reality behind the universe. The term God is originally a Germanic word and relates to the idea of the good, what is most beneficial in life. God in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic sense stands for the Creator of the universe, who has a personal nature, and is generally conceived of as a father who resides in Heaven.

Sanatana Dharma teaches that there is an ultimate spiritual reality, which one can call God, but that this reality transcends all names and forms. Its highest truth is monism ó not that there is only One God but that there is nothing but God. Such a Divine reality is not merely the Creator. It is the creation itself as well as the Absolute that transcends time, space and causation, the pure consciousness that Vedanta calls *Brahman*. All creatures are in essence that supreme Divine reality. Our soul is one with this Divine reality and can experience it within itself.

Hinduism distinguishes between God with qualities or *Ishvara*, the cosmic Creator, and God without qualities as Brahman, the Absolute behind creation. Only Ishvara is God in a theistic sense. Brahman transcends creation, which consists of merely the surface waves on its infinite sea. Brahman is a unity of truth, not of belief, but a truth that has many forms and functions in its manifestation.

IS THE DIVINE PERSONAL OR IMPERSONAL? A universal tradition recognizes the full range of personalities of the Godhead. It is not limited to any single personal God, prophet or incarnation. It recognizes all forms of the Divine as father, mother, friend, beloved and master. Yet the Divine is impersonal as well as personal, the formless Absolute of Being-Consciousness-Bliss as well as the cosmic Lord and Creator.

There is no contradiction between these personal and impersonal aspects of the Godhead. The impersonal Divine in its creative play assumes various personalities as the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer of the universe. It is the same reality with or without qualities. One can honor both aspects or one can focus on one aspect. All Divine possibilities are worthy of exploration.

WHAT IS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIVINE?

With the Divine or universal being is our only enduring (eternal) relationship. God is our true origin and goal, our ultimate friend and companion. The Divine is our father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, friend, and master. Whatever we are related to in essence is God or Brahman as the true being of all. God is the Self, the Divine presence in the hearts of all beings. We are not merely related to God, the Supreme Being is our true nature. In the highest truth, we donít have a relationship with God, we are God.

All that we experience is related to us as part of our own eternal and infinite consciousness and its creative capacity. The love we feel for others is only a portion of the love that is eternal, which is our own immortal Self. All relationship is an attempt to see our self in the other and the other in our self. There is only One Self in all beings seeking to rediscover its universal wholeness. All our relationships are in the Self and of the Self, which is neither you nor me but all.

WHY DO MANY RELIGIONS REFER TO GOD ONLY AS HE?

The Divine is both male and female, and beyond both male and female. One can call the Divine ìHeî relative to the masculine qualities of the cosmic being like strength, justice, will or discernment. One can call it ìSheî in reference to its feminine qualities like love, devotion and receptivity. One can call God ìItî relative to its neutral qualities like infinity, impartiality or pure existence.

If one only calls God ìHe,î then such a God is not the Supreme Being but a personification of a male centered view of reality. As our culture is dominated by male energy, not of a higher but of a lower order, we project this idea upon God as well. Such a one-sided conception of God is reflected in exclusivist religions, which claim that they alone have the truth. It can leads to imbalanced views or even violent actions. Therefore, while we can call God ìHeî, we should not limit how we can conceive his reality. The Divine is all beings and all relationships. He-she-it, you-me-them, whatever entity we conceive is our very own Self.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DIVINE MOTHER?

In western religions, the Divine is worshipped primarily as our heavenly Father. Protestant Christianity and Islam have all but banished the Divine as mother from their religions. Catholic Christianity has accepted the feminine principle of Mary but only as the mother of Jesus, not as God in her own right or as the Divine Mother of the entire universe.

Sanatana Dharma as a universal tradition has always recognized the importance of the Divine Mother. According to Hinduism, the deepest relationship that we can have with God is that of the Mother. No human relationship is closer than that of mother and child. It best mirrors our relationship

with the Divine. The land of India itself is regarded as a mother, often viewed as the Goddess Durga. The Hindu religion is regarded a mother and its teachings are her milk.

In the modern age in which we are recognizing the equality of the sexes, we can no longer reject the feminine aspect of divinity. The rejection of the feminine aspect of the Divine ó which is loving kindness, tolerance and caring nurturance ó and the promotion of the stern male-only father-sky God, has arguably contributed to the religious animosity that has devastated humanity over the last two thousand years.

What religion has ever aggressively promoted a belief in the Divine Mother? What form of religious fundamentalism or exclusivism has ever been made in the name of the Goddess? Who could ever kill people in the name of a God named Mother? What Mother would allow her children to be hurt, no matter how much they may have fallen? What Mother would condemn her children to damnation as sinners? Who could say, ìBelieve in the Divine Mother or you will go to an eternal hell?î Not surprisingly Hinduism, the worldís major religion that has honored the Goddess, has seldom promoted religious hostility and has never created such ideas as eternal damnation.

The female is the form side of the Divine. Woman represents the Divine embodied. Her worship requires the creation of appropriate forms to revere her, which is why aniconic or anti-image religions have little place for the Goddess. We must once again create images of the Divine Mother to allow her healing grace, which is essential for world peace, to descend. Without acknowledging the forms of the Divine Mother, our religions must be imbalanced and lead to various excesses.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND NATURE?

Some religions place God and nature apart or in conflict with one another. Others see nature as Godís creation, which he owns and rules from on high and for which the glory belongs only to him. The Hindu view is a little different.

According to Hinduism, nature is the manifestation of the Divine Being that is our very Self. Nature is our own greater body. The entire universe is our manifestation, the reflection in form of the formless truth of who we really are. We not only exist in nature, all of nature exists within us. We are the Cosmic Being that expresses itself through all the forms of creation. God has not merely created nature; nature exists in God as God. Nature is the expression of the Word of God. It is the Divine Message and teaching vehicle through which we can come to know our true Self.

What Hinduism teaches is not pantheism, the idea that nature is God, but monism, the truth that there is only One Reality which includes the world. Hindu saints and sages have always reveled in the world of nature, communicating through her with the divine existence. Nature is the Divine Mother who, if we are open to her beauty and her wisdom, will unfold all the mysteries of consciousness. Besides the outer nature is her inner form, the power of yogic knowledge, the intelligence that directs the evolution of consciousness, which ultimately takes us to the Supreme.

Nature and the Divine are one reality like the ocean. The manifest world is the outer waves, the formless Absolute the inner depths. But it is all the same water, all the same Being and that is our true nature as well.

WHY DO HINDUS WORSHIP MANY GODS? Human beings through history have formulated many different names and forms for the Divine or eternal, which different cultures have examined from their respective angles. The western world has prided itself in monotheism, the idea that there is only One God or Creator as the highest truth. Western religions have said that only the names and forms which refer to this One God are valid but those which appear to worship another God, or a multiplicity of divinities, must be false. They have restricted the names and forms they use in religious worship, and insist that only one set, which is theirs, is true and correct and others are

wrong or unholy.

As a universal formulation, Hinduism accepts all sincere approaches to truth. According to its universal view, there is only One Truth or reality, but it cannot be limited to a particular name or form. Though truth is One it is also universal, not an exclusive formulation. It is an inclusive, not an exclusive Oneness. The highest truth is a spiritual reality of Being-Consciousness-Bliss, which could be called God but which transcends all names. The different Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism represent various functions of this One Supreme Divinity, not separate Gods.

Having many names for something is not necessarily a sign of ignorance of its real nature. On the contrary, it may indicate an intimate knowledge of it. For example, Eskimos have fortyeight different names for snow in their language because they know snow intimately in its different variations, not because they are ignorant of the fact that all snow is only one. The many different deities of Hinduism reflect an intimate experience of the Divine on various levels. It is hardly a crude polytheism. Such a many sided approach to unity reflects deep wisdom and profound experience over many generations. It is to be honored, not to be denigrated at a superficial level.

WHY DO PEOPLE WORSHIP GOD IN DIFFERENT FORMS?

The Divine though formless in essence assumes various forms in its cosmic play. We ourselves have a form and are used to relating to life through forms. To move from the limitations of form to the unlimited formless Divinity, it helps to first conceive of the Divine as having a form. There is nothing wrong with the use of forms as long as they serve as vehicles. If we take them to be literally true and dismiss other possible forms for the Divine as wrong, such forms can become an obstruction and a cause of conflict. Some Hindu sects consider that the use of forms is better than approaching the Divine as formless. This is because the form is an easier vehicle for developing devotion.

Different people worship the Divine in different ways because the minds of human beings are different. The ultimate way to the Divine is to worship the Divine as the Self of all beings. This means that God or the Supreme Being can be found in the rocks, mountains, rivers and stars as well as beyond the world. Actually every form is a form of the Divine worthy of worship. What is important is to allow the free use of all forms so that all the doors to the Infinite are open to everyone. We must not only see God beyond the world but God in the world, in every form, to really know the omnipresent reality.

CAN THE DIVINE BE PORTRAYED IN ANIMAL FORMS?

God dwells in all nature. Animals are manifestations of the same Divine spirit as are human beings. Animals also have a soul, a mind and a personality. We should therefore honor the Divine presence in animals, which is not to worship their outer forms. Hindu thought honors animals according to the Divine Being expressing through them, not through look up to the animal state as the highest. Unless we can see the Conscious Being in all creation, we do not really see. We do not know ourselves, nor will be function as a humane and compassionate presence in the universe.

Hinduism recognizes that animals project certain cosmic energies through the Divine Self present within them. Animal images appear in Hinduism for their archetypal and poetic value, not as a mere worship of lower forms of life. Respect for the Divine in animals, which includes picturing the God in animals, is part of any universal teaching. It is not a sign of lack of spirituality but of a greater sensitivity to the sacred nature of all life. If we refuse to recognize God in animals, it only shows that we have not yet come into contact with the real Divinity, that our God is a human prejudice, not a universal truth. It indicates that we will probably abuse and exploit animals for our own personal pleasure, which is exactly the case in the world today.

Not only Hinduism, but all other pagan and native traditions see the Divine presence and cosmic

meaning of animal forms and use these widely both in ritual and in their teachings. Each animal has something to teach us about the nature of reality. Unless we know the inner meaning of our creaturely companions, we still do not know what life is really all about.

WHERE DO PEOPLE GO AFTER DEATH WHO WORSHIP THE DIVINE IN DIFFERENT WAYS? After death we gain that which we set our hearts upon in

life. We go to that to which we are most devoted to inwardly. This may be different than the names and forms we subscribe to outwardly, or the beliefs that we formally hold to. What we are most devoted to in life is that which we give most of our attention to, the most constant object of our thoughts and feelings.

We develop in ourselves the qualities that we most honor within us. If the God we worship is a God of anger, then we go to anger, we develop more anger in ourselves, and we go to worlds and incarnations dominated by anger once we have left this transient life. If the God we worship is a God of love, than we develop more love in ourselves and around us. We go to worlds and incarnations dominated by love.

To see where we will go after death, we must look at the qualities we most admire and focus on in life. This is a science that can be observed and understood, just as the plant we grow must be of the same nature as the seed that is placed in the ground. It is to be cognizant of what we worship and honor in life. If we honor the Divine in all beings, then we gain all worlds and transcend all worlds to the supreme reality beyond time and space, birth and death, ignorance and sorrow.

WHAT IS THE NAME OF GOD AND ITS IMPORTANCE?

There is only One Divine Reality or Supreme Being, which is both beyond all names and also possesses an unlimited number of names. In the Hindu tradition, one can call the Divine Shiva, Vishnu, Divine Mother, the Creator, or whatever one likes. No forms are rejected, nor is the formless. What is most important is the sincerity of our devotion. All the names and forms of the Divine which human beings have developed have their place, depending upon their qualities, energies and aspiration.

We donít think that the English word for grapes is the only legitimate word for grapes and those who call grapes by any other name know nothing about this particular fruit. Yet some religious groups may insist that the name for God belonging to their particular community is the only true name and should other people call upon that spiritual reality by another name, they must be calling upon something else or even worshipping something undivine. The name is not the thing. Even a person cannot be reduced to a single name. How much less so the infinite being? The Divine has all names and transcends all names. What is important is to know that reality not to try to impose one name or one idea about it on all humanity.

A name for the Divine enables us to establish a relationship with that transcendent Reality. Generally the name reflects various Divine qualities ó like love, peace, or truth ó which allow us a means of access to the higher truth. Repetition of Divine names is perhaps the easiest method of concentrating the mind. However, when we limit that transcendent reality to a mere name, which is a collection of letters, then the name becomes a factor of illusion and separation. We must use the name as a means to contact the inner being, not merely worship. Ultimately, we are that Being and its name is our name, which our every breath and heartbeat proclaims.

IS ATHEISM WRONG?

Atheism, the idea that there is no God or Creator, is a conception of the human mind that occurs at various stages of human development. It appears in unevolved minds that are unable to perceive any deeper reality than what is evident through the physical senses. Yet atheism appears in developed

minds that see through the dogmas of organized religion and can no longer accept these as true.

Some Dharmic traditions, like Samkhya philosophy or Buddhism, are not theistic in the sense that they do not regard God or a cosmic Lord as the ultimate reality. Yet it would be wrong to call them atheistic in the sense of those who deny any higher reality to the human being beyond the body. Such non-theists are not materialists but have a trans-theistic view of reality.

It is wrong to say that atheists are bad, whereas those who believe in God are good. The important thing is our inquiry into truth. If this inquiry is more alive in an atheist than in the dogmatic follower of a particular religious belief, such an atheist is a better seeker of truth and therefore closer to God who is truth than the so-called religious person. God does not punish atheists; rather, it is those who do not seek out the truth that become limited in their understanding, regardless of their outer beliefs.

Actually, most of us are atheists in our behavior, including those who may regard themselves as religious. What we believe in is not spiritual reality but in money, sex, power, converts and ideologies, all of which are material. If we hold to the reality of the Divine, we will not run after such outer aspects of life as the most important.

HOW SHOULD RELIGION BE PROPAGATED? True religion spreads itself by the force of truth. It does not rest upon overt efforts to convert others and transcends all organizational endeavors, which should aim at disseminating information, not promoting dogma. True religion (unity) is reflected in universal interdependence. It is spread by promoting unity consciousness in thought, word and deed. Without recognizing this universal truth, to seek to promote a particular religion is only to promote a separative and warring creed.

Religion is the recognition of the eternal and the infinite. This religion of truth is inherent in nature. The wind blows it. The sun shines it. The rivers make it flow. Flowers bloom through it. What is important is that we take it up and let it spread through our awareness, and through it let go of the limited identities and opinions of the mind.

In promoting religion we must avoid propaganda, which as an effort to influence the mind through emotions and slogans, not through the force of truth, calm thinking and meditation. Religious propaganda is a contradiction in terms. Religion is a means of connecting us with a higher reality. This cannot be done through appeal to the lower aspects of the human mind ó greed, fear, anger, hatred and division ó which propaganda aims at.

HOW SHOULD RELIGION BE ORGANIZED? According to Hindu Dharma, there should be no one religion, church, religious leader, or religious institution for all people. Religion should not be organized as a dogma, belief system, or exclusive social institution. It should not be standardized or stereotyped or it loses its spirit and creativity and becomes rigid and artificial.

Religion should aim at spiritual knowledge through inner practices of Yoga and meditation. It should be developed as a system of knowledge, not as a vested interested in the social and political world. It should not be oriented externally to gain a mass following but focused within to afford access to higher planes of awareness. Otherwise religion, like any outer institution, becomes corrupt. The larger the institution, the greater the corruption is likely to be.

The Hindu model is of many smaller spiritual groups and organizations in a general alliance or federation, respecting a unity of truth but a diversity of approaches. In this manner, religion can grow in a natural and organic way in which the individual, the real bearer of the sacred flame of consciousness, is honored and nurtured, not scaled down according to a belief. The real teachings are passed down orally from teacher to disciple, not made into a creed to be promoted in a rigid external form.

True religion is not something that we should personally attempt to organize. True spirituality reorganizes us, as it were, restructuring our own nature as body, mind and consciousness, placing us in harmony with the universal Being. Unless our inner being has gone through this integrating process, our efforts to propagate religion outwardly will remain caught up in partiality and illusion.

WHAT IS KARMA AND REBIRTH? Those who follow yogic traditions, as well as many natureoriented religions, teach that the soul takes many births in its evolution toward universality, Divinity or enlightenment. The soul must reap the fruits of its actions, must experience the consequences of the energies it has put forth. Just as there is an evolution of form (the body) through the world of nature, so there is a corresponding evolution of consciousness (the mind) through repeated births of the soul, which is the underlying consciousness behind the body. The soul is natureís vehicle for the evolution of intelligence, which occurs through its development in repeated births.

The law of karma is very scientific. The effects of our actions must be of the same nature and extent as the original actions themselves. It is not a question of reward and punishment but of energetics. Our actions set in motion a subtle force that pushes us along in life. If we act in a violent way towards others, for example, that violence becomes embedded in our psyche and reflects upon us, causing us to act and to be acted upon in a violent way. If we act in a loving and compassionate manner, on the other hand, that energy carries us along the stream of love and brings the forces of love into our life to the same degree and manner as the love we have put forth. Whatever we set in motion through action, even if that action is directed toward others, we first must come to experience within ourselves. When we die we take with us the essence of our actions and the will behind them, which becomes the basis of our next life.

Karma is the residue of past actions that follows the soul along its journey until it is able to transcend action which, based on desire, is always limited. The goal for Dharmic traditions is liberation into or union with the higher truth. This arises from knowledge, not action, because action which occurs in the realm of time cannot bring us to that which transcends time. We must learn to look beyond action and give up the sense of being the doer. Then the fluctuations of action and its result cannot disturb us, and whatever we do, being detached, will be inherently good.

IS LIFE PREDESTINED?

There is a karmic pattern to our lives. Whatever exists in the realm of time must follow the rhythms of time and the law of cause and effect. The present fruit must be of the same nature as the previous seed. Whatever we are in body and mind must be the result of our previous physical and mental patterns. This karmic destiny for some people is very fixed. For others it is capable of modification, though its basic features cannot always be changed. For example, we cannot change our parents, nor can we alter the country or time in which we are born. However, some people have such a developed nature along a particular line that we can say that they were destined to be great or destined to be a criminal, almost regardless of circumstances.

This is not to say that our inner Being is predetermined but only the outer pattern of our actions; and even that is capable of some modification. Our consciousness, not being a product of time, is inherently free. Karma and destiny belong only to the body-mind complex, which is not really ours anyway but belongs to the world of nature. Our ultimate destiny, which is inherent in everyone, is to realize our immortal Self. Everything else is a movement towards or deviation from this supreme goal.

ARE WE PUNISHED FOR WRONG ACTIONS? The Divine Being is not some great parent or judge in Heaven dealing out rewards and punishments. There is a natural law (dharma) and its

consequences according to the law of cause and effect (karma).

If you put your hand into a fire you get burned. God is not punishing you for the sin of putting your hand in a fire by burning you. It is not a sin but a matter of ignorance of natural law and a consequent experience of pain or limitation. Just as there are physical laws, like fireís capacity to burn, so there are mental and spiritual laws. Violence, for example, brings eventual destruction upon its perpetrator. But one is not punished for violence, violence as a negative state of mind with negative consequences creates its own punishment.

The problem is that the long term effects of our actions are not as obvious to us as their immediate results. For example, if we eat food, like too much sugar, which tastes good but is bad for us, its negative effect will not manifest immediately, like fire burning us, but will take time, causing eventual disease through poor digestion that may manifest as arthritis, heart disease or any number of problems. Because of the time lap involved between the cause and effect of our actions, we may not recognize the connection between the wrong food and the disease.

On the level of behavior, anger is destructive to our finer sensitivities and prevents us from developing any higher awareness. However, if our minds are not properly evolved, we may not recognize this pain; we may indulge in anger and find pleasure in it. But eventually we must experience the consequences of the forces we set in motion, both on short term and long term levels. Our anger, fear and attachment must lead us into situations that make us suffer. Wrong action itself is its own punishment because it causes the constriction of our consciousness, which always results in unhappiness.

DO HEAVEN AND HELL EXIST? Sanatana Dharma recognizes that the soul or reincarnating consciousness is one with the Divine and eternal reality. The soul is immortal and by its very nature ever blissful, free and happy. However, veiled by ignorance, it falls into darkness and confusion and makes various wrong judgments which lead to suffering in different incarnations.

Souls by their karma, the power of their own actions, create their own destiny, which leads to various happy or unhappy states of existence. A very happy state could be called heaven and a very unhappy state could be called hell. Yet there is no eternal or absolute heaven or hell. Any embodied state is bound by time and must come to an end after a certain period of time.

Moreover, an unlimited result cannot arise from a limited action, any more than a limited seed can produce an unlimited plant. Therefore, an unlimited or eternal heaven or hell can never result from limited creaturely actions, such as occur in human life. Our limited actions must lead to repeated incarnations, not to any final heaven or hell. Wrong actions lead to suffering but such suffering is equal to the nature of the action, which produced in time must be limited. There cannot be an eternal result through transient action. The idea of an eternal heaven or hell is irrational and shows an ignorance of the basic nature and laws of the universe. Hindus believe in a loving God who would never condemn any creature to an everlasting hell. To them, such a God would be the worst of tyrants and unworthy of worship.

Heaven and hell have been used by various priests to entice or frighten people into certain beliefs. Such heavens and hells do not exist. This heaven and hell idea appeals to the basic reward-punishment conditioning mechanism of the immature mind. It does not promote real ethical behavior so much as creating emotional imbalance and sometimes religious fanaticism. It is important to recognize that our actions have consequences in both this and future lives, but to place the specter of an eternal heaven or hell over people is to promote fear and ignorance. Only inner knowledge can release us from the cycle of karma, not any belief. This is a state of higher awareness, not a world that one can go to.

DOES EVIL EXIST?

There is an absolute good but there cannot be any absolute evil. Evil being a form of ignorance and limitation can never be absolute, though it can be a powerful force in this realm of the ignorance. All souls are inherently good and can only temporarily become evil owing to ignorance, which leads to various wrong and harmful actions.

Various negative forces exist in the universe which could be called, in some sense, evil. Just as there are toxins and pollutants in the physical environment, which can be called bad, so there are negative forces in our psychic and mental environment. Wrong actions create a negative force, which like mob action, can appear almost demonic. Yet however strong evil appears, it can never win in the realm of truth and eternity. Only in the outer realm of appearances can evil appear to have any real power. Inwardly in consciousness it does not really exist.

The idea of a Devil or that of an entirely evil being is fundamentally mistaken. No creature exists that is inherently evil or can act in an entirely evil manner. However, the evil or harmful actions of people can create a negative force that appears to have an existence of its own and can be almost overwhelming under certain circumstances. Such negative powers and entities do exist and must be reckoned with but can be transcended.

These negative forces are not the product of religious unbelief but of willful egoism. The way to transcend evil is to transcend the ego, which is to go beyond the barriers of belief and identity. Unfortunately, the specter of evil has been used to dominate or destroy people who think differently than a particular religious group. Such an idea of theological evil is itself one of the most evil things the human mind has ever invented, as the violence perpetrated in its wake throughout history has so often demonstrated. It turns other human beings, who are also God, into demons who have to be destroyed and are not even worthy of human consideration.

CAN HUMAN BEINGS BE REBORN AS ANIMALS? Human and animal evolutions are generally distinct. Once a soul has advanced to the human level, which affords easier access to higher states of consciousness than the animal state, it seldom falls back into animal births. Yet souls that are in the transitional phase between animal and human births may go back and forth for several incarnations. Human beings who have done much evil may also temporarily sink into painful animal births owing to the density of their karma.

However, while the general rule is that animal and plant evolution is lower than human evolution, there are exceptions. Sometimes great sages can take animal births like that of a bird, monkey or deer, or plant births like that of a great tree. Such births allow the sage to devote more time to meditation as they are less likely to be bothered by other people. Realizing the same Self in all beings, they can experience these lower forms of life as part of the same Divine existence. For example, the great sage Ramana Maharshi brought his cow to a state of liberation or Self-realization, demonstrating that spiritual practice is not achievable only for human beings.

Liberated sages can also manifest in or communicate to us through plants and animals, and through the whole world of nature. This is because they themselves have become the entire universe. The forces of nature become their vehicles, though they might not actually take birth within them.

DO HINDUS WORSHIP HUMAN BEINGS AS GODS? Given the prominence of Hindu gurus as well as the many Hindu avatars, some people think that Hindus worship human beings as Gods. Hindus may worship the Divine through the medium of great human beings who have realized the truth. However, in such cases it is not the human personality or physical body of the person which is revered but the Divine qualities manifested through them.

Hinduism holds that one of the best ways to worship the Divine is through honoring Self-realized

sages. This is because realized souls provide an example how to realize God in life, which can be more meaningful than a mere idea or image of God. Yet if we literally worship a human being as Divine, we fall from truth as God is the Self, not a particular person. And if we consider that God can only manifest through one human being, we fall into yet greater error because God manifests through all beings. Ultimately to know God we must see all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings.

ARE GURUS NECESSARY?

The Hindu tradition places a great importance on the role of the guru or spiritual guide, the man or woman who has realized the Divine and can lead others to it. In Hindu thought, the guru is more important than the holy book, prophet or savior with whom our contact is only indirect. Hinduism does honor the teachers and avatars of centuries ago but directs us towards great masters that exist in our own time period to show us the way to the Divine within us.

Hindu Dharma discriminates between spiritual masters or Self-realized souls and religious teachers, who are propagating a faith or belief based upon the teachings, experience or realization of another. Yet even relative to religious teachers, the Hindu idea of a religious teacher is different than that of other religions. A Hindu religious teacher is first of all a teacher of dharma or right living, not a preacher promoting conversion to a particular faith or creed.

In the Hindu view, gurus or realized souls are necessary to sustain the real spiritual essence of a religion, without whom the religion is likely to fall into mere outwardness and become a matter of belief rather than inner experience. Teachers are necessary in all fields of life. We have many different teachers during our education and attend many schools. Similarly, spiritual teachers are of utmost importance because the spiritual path is the most profound, subtle and difficult of all endeavors.

Some of us may require prolonged personal contact with a teacher. For others a short or indirect association may be enough. It is not always possible to spend much time with a great teacher, who is bound to have many disciples, but modern gurus have provided us many angles to their teachings through books, tapes, videos, camps and courses. Above all, we should remember that the real role of a guru is to help us understand ourselves. This means that it is not sufficient to honor the teacher, we must practice their teachings.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF PRIESTS IN HINDUISM? Hinduism has various officiants who perform rituals and sacraments like marriage and naming of children. These officiants are sometimes called priests. Their prime role is to aid in the performance of rituals. They do not take confession, preach, proselytize, or function as missionaries. Nor do they serve as intermediaries between the lay population and the

Divine. These priests can be married and usually have families of their own.

Such priests are different from yogis or swamis and are generally regarded as fulfilling a lesser role. The yogis are the great teachers and gurus. The priests are helpers in the outer aspects of religion. Such priests are taught to bow down to the spiritual experience of the great sages and should never be made into a ruling class, either over religious or secular matters.

We need such priests but their role should be understood. In western religions, there has not been the proper understanding of the importance of Self-realized gurus. This has given priests and preachers more power than is appropriate, which has led to various excesses and distortions in the name of religion. The preacher or priest speaks in the name of God, yet without the realization which can make such statements true and valid.

CAN ONE CHANGE GURUS?

We have many teachers in the different fields of learning that we take up in life. We donít have only

one grade school teacher, or only one science teacher. Being exposed to a variety of teachers allows us a wider horizon of learning and we cease to identify the teaching with a mere person.

Yet it is possible to have a special relationship with a particular teacher who serves as our prime mentor or role model to help us integrate the knowledge that we gain from various sources. This is particularly important on the spiritual path because inner knowledge relates to the eternal aspect of our nature and is not just a short term subject of study. We may have one primary spiritual teacher or guru whose teaching serves as the central focus for our inner practices, just as an artist or a doctor may have a primary mentor or tutor. In the spiritual life, we should be connected to a teaching that leads us to the realization of the Divine within us and a teacher who provides a model for it. Such a Self-realized guru or Sadguru is central to Hindu practices and dharmic traditions as a whole. It is also important to maintain connection with the same basic tradition and approach. If we mix teachers of different traditions, even if they may be great masters, and jumble different practices together based upon our own inclinations, it can cause confusion. While we can honor many teachers, we generally need for focus on a single teacher or line of approach in order to move directly to our goal.

B. Religious and Spiritual Practices

WHAT IS YOGA?

Yoga arose originally as a Hindu system of spiritual practice to enable to realize the unity of the individual soul (Jivatman) with the Supreme Self or supreme reality (Paramatman). There are many different yogic approaches in the Hindu tradition including the Yoga of Knowledge (Jnana Yoga), the Yoga of Devotion (Bhakti Yoga), the Yoga of Service (Karma Yoga), and the Yoga of Technique (Kriya Yoga). The latter can be divided fourfold as Mantra Yoga, Laya Yoga (the Yoga of the Sound Current), Hatha Yoga (the Physical and Pranic Yoga) and Raja Yoga (the Yoga of Meditation Techniques).

Yoga is a complete and integral science of spiritual development with methods and approaches for all temperaments and all levels of aspirants. The most specific system of classical Yoga is the Raja Yoga of Patanjali explained his great compilation, the *Yoga Sutras*. The main traditional teachings of Jnana Yoga are those of the great sage Shankaracharya. The main text of Bhakti Yoga is the *Bhakti Sutras* of Narada. Jnana, Bhakti and Karma Yogas are all dealt with in the *Bhagavad Gita* of Sri Krishna, which is perhaps the most important and comprehensive of all yogic texts. The practice of Yoga is the essence of true action for all human beings.

ISNíT THIS A DIFFERENT VIEW THAN YOGA IN THE WEST?

Yoga in the West has come to emphasize asana or Yoga postures, which is a small and preliminary part of the larger Yoga system. The western world is physically oriented and so more concerned with the outer practices of Yoga. As such, it is Hatha Yoga, or the Yoga of physical culture, that has become most popular in the West.

Yet even traditional Hatha Yoga includes pranayama and meditation, as well as internal purification disciplines. It is a part of sadhana or spiritual practice meant to lead one to Raja Yoga or meditation practices. These deeper aspects of Yoga are recognized by many people, even in the West, particularly those who are interested in higher awareness, but go far beyond any exercise class or fitness system.

WHAT IS VEDANTA?

Vedanta is the culminating portion of the *Vedas,* the main source books of Hinduism, which deals with the ultimate truth of Self-realization, the supreme goal of life. Vedanta teaches the great truth that the Self is God, that our inner being is one with the supreme reality.

There are several schools of Vedanta but all seek realization of God or truth within us. Vedantic

schools discuss the nature of the Absolute (Brahman), the Creator (Ishvara), the soul (Jiva) and Nature, as well as karma, rebirth, bondage and liberation. Vedanta contains philosophy, theology and yogic approaches. It is a vast treasure house of wisdom that explains all the mysteries of life and comprehends all worlds and all states of consciousness.

Yoga is the practical side of Vedanta. Without yogic practices, Vedanta remains a mere theory. Without Vedantic knowledge, yogic practices remain superficial. Vedanta is the real essence of Hinduism and Yoga is its practice. The great teachings of Yoga-Vedanta are the core of Sanatana Dharma or the eternal tradition and should be spread all over the world.

WHAT IS NON-DUALITY (ADVAITA)? Non-duality (Advaita) is the understanding that there is only one truth or reality, and therefore only One Self in all beings. This one truth is Being-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute (Satchit-Ananda Brahman). It exists equally in the Creator (Ishvara), the soul (Jiva) and in the world (Jagat) and transcends all three. Such pure unity is not merely a theory but the experiential unity of the perceiver, the action of seeing, and the object perceived. Advaita or non-dualistic Vedanta is the main school emphasized by Jnana Yoga or the Yoga of Knowledge.

Without knowing the One, we remain trapped in duality, ignorance and sorrow. To know the One is to become it, which is to recognize the Self-existent reality. This requires profound meditation, which in turn is only possible if we have first purified our minds of egoism and learned to live in harmony with universal law. Non-duality is the highest goal of all religious seeking. In Advaita Vedanta, it is explained with impeccable clarity, crystal clear logic, and the most powerful insight.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Meditation, like religion or spirituality, is a word that can be used to mean a number of things, several of which may have little to do with what meditation really is. The word meditation may be used for prayer, contemplation, visualization, affirmations, pranayama or mantra. So too, the goal of meditation has taken on different meanings. Meditation may be used for stress relief, for fulfilling oneís personal desires and other limited objectives.

Meditation (Dhyana) in the true sense refers to the ability to unite the mind with the object of our perception. Its goal is liberation from the dualistic state and unification with the Divine as the ultimate ground of Being. Meditation occurs when we empty our minds of extraneous thoughts and focus on the Divine Presence that is the true reality behind all things. Meditation is the main method of the Yoga of Knowledge (Jnana Yoga), but is part of all other yogic methods as only through deep meditation can we achieve the state of unity that Yoga aims at.

Meditation techniques harmonize the mind and body to allow for the state of meditation to proceed without obstruction. Yogic postures (asanas) calm and relax the body. Yogic breathing practices (pranayama) deepen and calm the breath. Mantra, visualization and concentration techniques control and focus the mind and draw it within. Then meditation, which is the natural state of the mind, can flow easily.

DOES MEDITATION HAVE PREREQUISITES? Meditation is not something that anyone can do at any time. Like any profound practice, meditation requires a certain foundation and particular way of life to support it. Meditation, which is directing the mind towards mergence in the Divine or ultimate reality, cannot occur unless oneís life is oriented properly.

To properly practice meditation requires a foundation of ethical living. One should hold to the universal yogic ethics of non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, control of sexual energy and non-attachment. One should practice a daily life of cleanliness, contentment, austerity, self-study and surrender to the Divine. These are the preliminary practices of Yoga (Yamas and Niyamas) as defined in the *Yoga Sutras*, the classic text on Yoga. Naturally, one cannot follow all these perfectly

in the beginning but they should be the guiding principles of our behavior.

These prerequisites mean that we should live a clean, simple and quiet life, that we should have emotional peace of mind, that we should have right relationships and have a vocation that is helpful to others. Sitting in a comfortable posture (asana), calm control of the breath (pranayama), withdrawing the mind from sensory distractions (pratyahara), and concentrated attention (dharana) are the yogic practices which allow deep meditation to develop within us.

WHY IS MEDITATION IMPORTANT? Meditation appears to be a useless act. It doesnít produce anything tangible or help anyone in a visible manner. To understand its importance we must understand the nature and role of the mind. The mind is our instrument for perceiving truth. It is like the mirror in a reflector telescope. If that mirror is tarnished or if its surface is uneven, we cannot perceive things correctly. If that mirror is clear and even, then we can perceive things as they are; which is to see the Divine presence in all.

Meditation is important because it purifies the mind to allow us to perceive the truth. Once we know the truth, we can act in harmony with it. The very knowledge of truth is the greatest of all powers. Hence meditation is the greatest practice. It can gain all the worlds and all time. Meditation is the main form of worship in Sanatana Dharma. It is the highest dharmic action of our consciousness.

WHAT IS SELF-INQUIRY?

Self-inquiry (Atma-vichara) is perhaps the most important meditation practice of the Yoga of Knowledge (Jnana Yoga). It consists of tracing the I-thought back to its origin in pure consciousness. One casts aside the object portion of oneís thoughts, the this or that with which the I has been identified, or the I-am-the-body idea, and strives to discover the pure I-initself devoid of all objectivity. This means to try to find out who we really are in our eternal Being as apart from the transient becoming in our outer lives.

Self-inquiry system is perhaps best explained in the modern world in the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, though it is the essence of Vedanta as found in the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita.* It is the royal path to non-duality (Advaita).

WHAT IS THE YOGA OF DEVOTION (*BHAKTI YOGA*)?

The Yoga of Devotion is devotion to Ishvara or the Cosmic Lord as a spiritual path. It is not mere devotion to a religious leader or holy book, but devotion to the Divine Being as the inner reality behind the universe.

The Yoga of Devotion involves repeating Divine names, chanting, singing, rituals and a deep meditation in which we come into proximity to the Divine within us and are able to merge into it. Devotion (Bhakti) usually takes a form, which may be that of a particular deity, avatar or teacher, though formless devotion exists as well. Devotion usually establishes a relationship with God as father, mother or beloved. Devotional practices, however, are not formalities or technicalities but a spontaneous unfoldment of the heart in its love of God.

Devotion is the most basic and easiest of all spiritual paths because love of God is inherent in the soul. Even if we cannot think of knowing God, we can uncover this spontaneous love of the eternal Lord. Devotion is also the basis of wisdom because only if we love truth can we really learn what it is. All of our human problems occur from seeking love apart from the Divine. Seeking love in the Divine, which is to recognize the Divine love in all creation, is the end to all human suffering.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF SURRENDER? Surrender is the primary approach of the Yoga of Devotion (Bhakti Yoga). It consists in surrendering oneself completely to the Divine or truth. This requires offering all our thoughts and feelings, wishes and desires to the Divine to work with

according to the Divine Will.

Surrender is the main capacity of the soul. It arises naturally when we give up personal seeking. By surrendering to the Divine presence in all things, we gain the grace inherent in everything. Surrender then is an acknowledgement of the universal truth and a perception of the universal Being in all beings.

We suffer in life from an unwillingness to surrender. We as human beings try to do everything ourselves. We try to impose our limited personal will upon the unlimited universe, which leads to frustration. We think that the burdens of the world belong to us and that we must try to save everyone. Surrender, which is recognizing the Divine rulership over all, is letting go of this personal will and brings real peace and happiness. We cannot change life, nor do we need to try to. The Divine power is ever at work, accomplishing all that is necessary to do. If we look within and surrender we will find that all the imperfections of the world lose their significance.

WHY SHOULD ONE REPEAT MANTRAS? Sound makes up the mind. It determines the field in which we think, feel and perceive. You can observe this for yourself. Note the kinds of sounds you repeat and take in during the day and see how these affect you. A harmonious sound pattern in the mind facilitates a deeper awareness. A disturbed sound pattern in the mind prevents our awareness from going deeper.

Mantras are spiritually energized sound patterns designed to link us up to the Divine Word or cosmic creative vibration. They help purify and silence the mind to allow for deep meditation. Mantras set up a different kind of energy in the mind, an intentional energization of the mind toward spiritual practice and realization.

Mantras are simple and easy to do as they only require that we recite a word audibly or mentally. Mantras can be done anywhere or anytime as they do not depend upon any external substances. Mantra is thereby the most practical tool of the spiritual life. All of us should do regular mantras to connect with the Divine. Then we will no longer have to struggle to meditate. Mantra should become the ground of our minds, then nothing that comes from the realm of the senses can imbalance us.

WHAT IS THE YOGA OF SERVICE (*KARMA YOGA*)? True service is to serve the Divine to help the Divine Will unfold in the world. This requires devotion and surrender. Service is not promoting one religious creed against another or fostering conversion to a belief. Such selfless service is only possible when our actions are not based upon personal or collective motivation, when we are not seeking special results for ourselves in what we do.

Service may involve all manner of help whether charity, medical aid, teaching, or establishing schools and hospitals. It may include helping animals and caring for the Earth itself. It may involve political action but approached with care, sensitivity and selflessness. Whether these outer actions are spiritually beneficial depends upon on whether we are working in harmony with Divine grace. This we can know by the peace of mind that our service brings us and its ability to open us up to higher states of consciousness.

Whatever we do in life should be a service to the Divine. If it is not then our action is deficient and will not bring what we truly seek. Our spiritual practice itself, meditation done properly, is the highest service in which we bring the Divine power directly into our own minds and into the entire world with which we are connected.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF COMPASSION IN HINDU THOUGHT?

Sanatana Dharma emphasizes compassion as the main attitude we should have towards other creatures and charity or giving as the main duty that we need to perform in life. Compassion consists of offering prayers, blessings and good wishes for all beings, including animals, plants, departed

ancestors and inhabitants of subtle worlds. Charity consists of actions done to benefit other people and the world, not merely material aid but service of all types, including teaching.

Yet charity is part of the outer dimension of the compassion. In the oneness of reality there is really no one to give and no one to receive. True compassion must rest upon Selfknowledge or it can become a separative act. True compassion is not helping those we consider to be weak, poor or deprived, but respecting and nurturing the Divine Self in all creatures.

Compassion toward others should be balanced with devotion to the Divine. True compassion comes from the Divine and flows through us by the strength of our devotion. True compassion has no secret motive to gain, or to receive recognition as being a compassionate person. It is part of the movement of Oneness in which we do not see any real difference between self and other.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF PRAYER IN HINDU THOUGHT?

Since the ancient *Vedas*, Hindu teachings contain prayers, praises and propitiations to the supreme reality in its different aspects. Prayers may be given on different levels. The lower level consists of praying to the Divine for ordinary goals of life like health, wealth, and personal happiness, which is essential for the right functioning of society. The higher level is to pray to God for spiritual knowledge and Divine love. This is necessary to bring us into the spiritual life. There is a third form of prayer in which we pray to the Divine for the benefit of others. The highest form of this is to pray to the Divine for the benefit of all creatures, such as prayers for universal peace and understanding.

There is a science of prayer through which we can connect with the Divine energies in the universe to bring about the fulfillment of the desires of the soul. For this purpose the use of the appropriate mantras and rituals is very important. Prayer like mantra can also be misapplied and used for non-spiritual ends. If our prayer is motivated by the wish to control or hurt others, for example, it is impure. Prayer to convert others to a belief is another lower form of prayer that is tinged with egoism and violence.

Prayer is preliminary to meditation through which alone is there can be direct knowledge of the Divine. Real communion with the Divine comes through the silent mind, the mind that is not seeking anything for itself but is open to the bliss of pure existence. The receptive mind is the highest state of prayer, in which no thought occurs.

WHY SHOULD ONE PERFORM RITUALS? Whatever action we do repeatedly is a kind of ritual that shapes our lives. If we jog every day or watch a certain television program every week then these things gain a certain momentum in our lives. Any routine or discipline is a kind of ritual. Religious rituals are special actions with spiritual intent that we repeat in order to set in motion a higher power in our lives. Hinduism contains many such rituals which employ all the essences of creation ó flowers, fragrances, fruits, incense, lamps, and artistic forms ñ to help create a favorable environment to bring spiritual vibrations into the world.

Yet when a religious ritual is done without knowledge or devotion, or when there is an intention to control others or further some vested interest, such rituals become negative and can generate harmful forces. It is important to only perform rituals that are formulated to bring peace and understanding, which link us with the whole of life, and do not merely place us with a particular community as opposed to others.

Ritual is necessary for everyone. It purifies the mind and brings benefic forces into society. It changes our psychic field so that our minds become receptive to higher forces. We must also remember that the most important ritual or regular action we should do is meditation, which is the great ritual of awareness, offering the seen into the seer for the beauty of reality.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY HINDU RITUALS? Hindus find a Divine presence or Gods and Goddesses everywhere, in people, plants, animals, and different places in nature. They may even perform ritual worship to inanimate objects like books, automobiles or computers. While this may appear as a superstition to those of us who have lost our sense of the sacred, there is an important and universal meaning behind it.

To worship something in the Hindu sense means to recognize the Divine presence within it and to seek its grace. We need the grace, favor, communication and understanding of all that we are connected with in life; and nothing is really without consciousness or apart from the Divine. Hindu ritualworship (puja) is both an art and science for accomplishing this. We need to honor the Divine in everything, particularly in the most simple and intimate things of our lives. If we only honor God in the distance, we are ignorant of his all-pervasive being, and our own ordinary actions will be ungodly. To have a strong and yet diverse culture of ritual aids to both the development of the human spirit and its proper interaction with the universe. While it may be difficult for us to understand today, it should not be devalued.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF TEMPLES? Temples are places in which the power of collective spiritual aspiration is developed and focused. Temples are like power stations for generating a higher consciousness in society. They are like communication centers to contact the Divine and the cosmic powers. Temples are perhaps the most important buildings in a community, more significant than any government building, news center or bank. They serve the same type of functions but on an inner level. Temples serve to bring spiritual energies into the world and help purify our collective psyche of negative karmas. A real temple is a place of inner worship. It is not a church where preaching goes on, but a place of peace in which meditation and devotional worship occurs to open our minds and hearts to the Divine.

For the Hindu mind, religion and life are not separate, just as God and nature are one. A Hindu temple includes life and people along with the Gods and gurus. It is not an austere or puritanical monument to a belief, but an expression of life in all of its richness and abundance. A Hindu temple includes art work, paintings and sculptures of all kinds. It includes music and dance and the temple itself is a place where various festivals occur. It has a place for animals like elephants, monkeys, cows or peacocks. It has incense, lamps, flowers and generally a water tank for ritual bathing. Even food and sweets are there. It is a place not only for adults but also for children. It is a place not just for a Sunday service or prayer at a particular time of the day but a place one can come at any time. The Hindu temple is a miniature universe. It includes everything and therefore it does not stand apart from anything like other places of worship may appear to.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF PILGRIMAGE (*YATRA*)?

Pilgrimage consists of visiting sacred sites for worship and meditation. These sacred places may be man made structures like temples or powerful locations in nature like mountains or rivers. Such places in nature may be made more holy by the practices various sages and yogis have performed there. Hindus recognize innumerable holy places and find them wherever they live.

Each place has its own energy. Certain places have a greater spiritual energy than others, which we can benefit from by visiting them. Yet the pilgrimage to external holy places is no substitute for the inner pilgrimage which is mantra and meditation. Actually our entire life is a pilgrimage and all places are sacred sites. This is what we learn through going to holy places. All of us should perform pilgrimage, particularly when we want to change our lives in a higher direction.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF MONASTICISM? Most religions have monastic orders, which therefore must be part of any universal teaching. Such orders, properly formulated, allow individuals

to devote themselves exclusively to spiritual practices by not placing outer demands upon them.

There are many monastic orders within the Hindu tradition. Yet Hindu monks do not always live at a particular monastic institution. They may wander, gaining food by begging, stopping temporarily at different ashrams, or taking residence in the mountains. They devote themselves to lives of Yoga and meditation and often become great teachers.

True monasticism, however, should not be confused with missionaries, who are not devoted to spiritual practices but to converting others to a belief. If one is not doing spiritual practices, monasticism may be no more than a devotion to a dogma or institution, and generally turns negative. Certain militant or political monastic orders have done great damage in the world.

Nor does the value of monasticism exclude the value of the married or householder life. While the monastic path can be more direct, the householder life is generally more practical and can in time lead to the same goal.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-VIOLENCE? Non-violence is perhaps the cardinal virtue recognized in Sanatana Dharma or universal tradition. Non-violence is the supreme Dharma, the great law of life. To the extent that we fall from non-violence, we cease to be truly religious and lose our connection with the Divine.

Dharma means natural law and the most basic natural law is to remain in harmony with our fellow creatures. No creature likes to suffer. To attune ourselves with the nature of all beings, we should not seek suffering for any being. Non-violence, therefore, is the foundation of all true ethics of truthfulness, honesty and non-stealing. Non-violence in Hinduism is the universal great vow. Only if we have an attitude of nonviolence toward all beings can we have true universality.

Non-violence means not to wish harm for any being in thought, word and deed. It is not merely a matter of refraining from physical violence. It means non-violence in our own homes and families as well. Nor is it limited to human beings. It means to not be violent towards plants, animals or the Earth itself.

Non-violence is a great aid to Self-realization because if we see the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self, we cannot possibly wish harm to anyone. Violence is the denial of religion which, first of all, should be peace. To use violence to promote a religion is to deny the real spirit of religion. To try to make a religion spread through the use of force is not to spread religion but irreligion. This at least is the Hindu view.

DOES NON-VIOLENCE EXCLUDE SELF-DEFENSE? True non-violence recognizes the right of people to defend themselves, their lives and their property, including their family, community and country, from unprovoked attack. However, monks and yogis who have renounced the world no longer have any attachments. They are not required to defend anything, though it is not wrong for them to defend themselves or others if they choose to.

It is important that non-violence does not become an excuse for not defending the truth, which requires that we hold to the truth even when faced with opposition. Non-violence does not mean to passively and fearfully allow the forces of untruth to promote themselves unquestioned. True non-violence is not cowardice that flees from confrontation but courage which faces all confrontations without running away or resorting to unnecessary force. Yet even if we have to resort to physical violence to protect ourselves and others, this should be a last resort.

WHAT IS A DHARMA YUDDHA? *Dharma Yuddha* means a dharmic battle or war. It is a struggle to defend dharma, which may be internal or external, a battle against negative tendencies in oneself or adharmic forces in society. It is not a battle to enforce a belief on other people or to protect one belief or set of beliefs against another.

Today there is a great Dharma Yuddha going on in the world, a battle between the forces of dharma and adharma, the energies of higher awareness and ignorance on the planet. This is occurring on many levels from our own psyche, to the political, economic, intellectual and media realms. Each one of us is called to fight in this battle and there are no neutral parties. One is either promoting the forces of dharma or those of adharma.

Much of this battle is in the field of information, with adharmic forces promoting negative views of dharmic teachings that must be countered. For this modern Dharma Yuddha, the main Kshatriya or warrior class needed today is an intellectual Kshatriya who can wage and win this media war. Yet some of this battle is in the streets and even on the battlefield. It is not only a fight between organized armies but one against terrorism and hidden enemies.

Ahimsa in Sanatana Dharma requires defense of dharma, which means taking action to reduce the amount of harm going on in the world, through limiting the forces of violence, division and destruction. Sometimes self-defense is necessary for this as the case of Arjuna and the Pandavas in the Mahabharata War, who had to fight a bitter battle, in which most warriors on both sides perished. This Dharma Yuddha is not a jihad or a crusade for a belief, but it does require struggle, effort, courage and daring. We must confront the adharmic forces not only around us but also inside ourselves. Sometimes this adharma is an unwillingness to fight or take a stand. Dharma is not always avoiding conflict; it is overcoming negative forces through the power of dharma.

WHY IS THERE VIOLENCE IN HINDU STORIES? The main violence that we observe in Hindu mythology is the destruction of various demons by deities, avatars or great sages, as in the story of Rama and Ravana in the Ramayana. These are symbols for truth destroying falsehood and are far from ordinary depictions of human violence, much less a glorification of it. Even in the Mahabharata War, violence was taken up as the last measure by people of the warrior class after all else has failed, as part of a defensive battle. There is nowhere in Hinduism a glorification of violence to promote religion or as part of wars of conversion.

However, there are violent and corrupt elements in human society that promote violence, crime and conflict. These must be kept in check. The best way is through the proper education that prevents negative behavioral patterns from developing. Yet if these negative actions do arise, it may be necessary to restrain those who perpetrate them, sometimes by force, just as a tumor must sometimes be surgically removed to save the health of the body.

For this purpose of restraint, Hinduism recognizes and honors the role of the warrior class, which includes occupations like the police and the military. Such spiritual warriors should aim at preventing harm in the world and actively reducing it. For them, knowing how not to respond with force is perhaps more important than being able to respond with force. Rama, Krishna, Arjuna and Yudhishthira are some of the great warrior heroes of Hindu culture who demonstrate such restraint, self-discipline and self-abnegation. If Dharma is attacked, Dharma must be defended, not with brutality but with justice.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF ART IN SPIRITUALITY? The western world has suffered from a split between the sacred and the profane going back nearly two thousand years. Into the realm of the profane was placed not only business but art, science and philosophy. The sacred was limited to the realm of religious law and theology, in which creative expression was denigrated along with the idea that the world is evil and God has no image. This denial of images naturally stifles art, particularly of a sacred nature. When images have been allowed as in Catholicism, their forms are restricted according to religious doctrines. Similarly music was sometimes banned as unholy or restricted in its forms or usage. When art did escape the shackles of religion, which began in Europe with the

Renaissance, it developed apart from religion and has become largely a personal affair, not a way of connecting with the cosmic mind as in Hindu thought.

In India this split between art and religion did not occur, though Hindus discriminate outer or mundane from inner or spiritual knowledge. In the Hindu view, art can be a way of spiritual knowledge. It is a question of attitude and approach. Art can be a natural expression of devotion or love of God. The Hindu religion is filled with poetry, drama, sculpture, painting, music and dance as an integral part of worship, as part of the temple and its regular activities. The forms of Hindu art contain all the beauty and variety of life and nature. Hindu music is not somber or rarefied but full of vitality. The sculpture can be voluptuous. It is often hard for people to tell the difference between Hindu religious art on one hand, and art of a folk or personal nature on the other. The two were never separate.

Art is one of the doors to the spiritual life. Creativity is a step toward Divinity. Such art, however, should be done as an act of worship or as a means of seeking Truth, in which case it can embrace all the beauty of nature and wisdom of awareness. Art done out of selfish or commercial motives, or which comes from the intellect only, cannot take us to the real fountainhead of creativity that lies within us. Today we need a creative renaissance in the world, in which art in all of its forms is once more taken up as part of the spiritual life. Art should be a form of worship, filled with devotion, and carrying the power of the cosmic being. Otherwise we have failed not only in the realm of art but in the realm of spirituality as well, and our culture will remain immature.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF THE OCCULT IN SANATANA DHARMA?

Western religions have generally been opposed to the occult. They have been against divinatory methods like astrology and have oppressed or even executed occultists as witches. They often see occultism as the working of the Devil. The pagan traditions that such religions originally supplanted used the occult, and discrediting the occult was part of the strategy for overcoming these older traditions.

Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition accepts all valid forms of knowledge. It recognizes the occult as a subtler realm of nature. Beyond the physical or realm of material form exists the astral realm in which various spirits, gods and angels exist, and through which we can develop various extrasensory powers and experiences. Knowledge of this subtle realm is part of life and can be explored. It is nothing either to fear or to be in awe of.

The occult is one of the doors to the spiritual life as it takes us beyond the limitations of the senses and the materialistic idea of reality. Yet occult knowledge, though it can help direct us toward spiritual knowledge should not be confused with it. Spiritual knowledge is knowledge of the Self, who is the supreme divinity beyond all worlds. Occult knowledge is subtler than the physical science but still limited to the manifest realm. The occult planes include subtle realms of illusion and magic. We must be careful in our examination of them just as we have to be careful in dealing with chemistry, nuclear physics or other subtle aspects of science. We should explore them with the help of devotion to the Divine and awareness of the higher consciousness and not lose sight of the fact that they are only another aspect of who we really are. Such an examination of subtle realms is an integral part of Yoga.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF VEDIC ASTROLOGY? Astrology is the most important of the occult sciences because it shows how the subtle forces of the universe affect us throughout our lives, both individual and collective. Any universal spiritual tradition requires a sound system of astrology for a complete understanding of the workings of universe and the unfolding of the law of karma.

Vedic or Hindu astrology (Jyotish) is a well-developed system of astrology imbued with the

wisdom of innumerable sages and self-realized yogis. It is a deep science with many layers, reflecting the profound harmony of the universe. It can help us understand the pattern of our health, career, relationships and the development of our spiritual life. It provides the keys to the movement of our life on all levels.

Such a science of astrology should not be confused with crude fortune telling. It is not a matter of wishful thinking but of a profound study of how the stars and planets affect us. The true astrologer is the ultimate psychologist and sociologist who can help us build the foundation for the spiritual life. He or she unfolds the hidden pattern and meaning behind our lives so that we can take the appropriate action at the appropriate time and thereby fully use our soulís potential in this incarnation.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF AYURVEDIC MEDICINE?

Health is the foundation of all that we do. Without adequate health, we will not have the energy to pursue any of the goals of life. Yet true health is not merely physical strength and stamina but purity of body and mind, which is also necessary for spiritual practice. As a spiritual form of healing, Ayurveda directs us to self-understanding as the ultimate means of health and harmony. It does not stop short with feeling good physically but shows us how to use the healthy body to pursue a higher life.

Ayurveda is the medical aspect of the universal tradition of Sanatana Dharma, the Vedic form of medicine for body and mind. It shows us how the great forces of nature work to sustain our body-mind functioning and how they can be consciously used to maintain the harmony and health of our entire being. It promotes health through the use of diet, herbs, specially prepared mineral formulations, and profound therapies of detoxification and rejuvenation, along with recommending a life-style based upon the ascertainment of our particular psycho-physical constitution according to the balance of the elements within us.

Ayurveda is the medicine of nature, the medicine of life, which brings to us the healing forces of the greater universe. Until we restore the healing forces of nature into society, our planet must remain in crisis and our medical systems as much a curse as a blessing for our greater well-being. Ayurvedic medicine is, therefore, of crucial importance for healing ourselves and healing our world.

WHY SHOULD ONE LEARN SANSKRIT? An essential part of a universal tradition is a universal language. Such a universal language exists within Sanatana Dharma as Sanskrit, the ancient mantric language of the great yogis and seers. Sanskrit is the oldest of the Indo-European languages and has been looked upon as the mother of all languages.

Language is based upon sound and meaning. The meaning is the most important thing but the sound should be appropriate to it. This is why poetry, which blends sound and meaning, has so much power. Each sound has a certain energetic quality that can be useful for conveying certain meanings. Sanskrit is a purely spiritual language in which sound and meaning are united in the right way. Sanskrit reflects the laws and powers of cosmic intelligence and patterns human speech according to universal law. As such, it is an extremely precise language for working with spiritual experiences. Not surprisingly, we have had to import many Sanskrit words into English ó like guru, mantra, prana, Shakti, and Kundalini ó to help us understand the deeper realms that our ordinary language and mentality is not familiar with.

Learning Sanskrit can be an important tool for developing the mind, controlling thought, sharpening perception and increasing creativity. It also provides access to the largest literature of Self-knowledge and Yoga in the world: Hindu, Buddhist and Jain teachings going back for many thousands of years. However, we should not merely learn to read Sanskrit or approach it as a dead language. The power of Sanskrit resides in its sound. We should learn to speak and chant it,

eventually even to think in terms of it.

Classical Sanskrit was codified by the great grammarian Panini (c. 500 BC), whose classic the *Ashtadhyaya* is still studied for a proper understanding of the language. His model of language was recently found to be the most scientific for use with computers. Sanskrit is thus both the language of the past and the future. Through it we can communicate with all time.

If one approaches Hinduism through Sanskrit, one will find no problems in understanding its true meaning as Sanatana Dharma. It is only because of the misrepresentation of Hinduism in other languages, which distort the meaning of Sanskrit terms, that the religion is not properly understood.

The almighty power of the Supreme Divinities is only One. Rig Veda III.55.1 *Endless vast paths encircle Heaven and Earth.* Rig Veda Rig Veda V.45.2

May Heaven and the Atmosphere grant us peace. May the Earth give us peace along with the Waters. May the herbs and the forests be peaceful to us. May all the cosmic powers grant us peace. May the Divine Being grant us peace. May the entire universe be at peace. May there be the peace of peace. May that peace dwell within me.

Shukla Yajur Veda XXXVI.17

Questions 2 Sanatana Dharma and the Modern World

In this section we will examine the issues of culture, religion, and spirituality from the standpoint of Hindu thought to see not only what is relevant today, but what is truly universal and meaningful. We will find much that is significant not only in the spirituality of Sanatana Dharma but in its cultural forms, regardless of whether we live in India or in the West.

A. Religion, Spirituality and the Modern World

SHOULD WE FOLLOW ANY RELIGION AT ALL? If we look at what religions have done to humanity throughout history, it appears that it might be better not to be religious at all. It would save us from many wars, hostilities and misunderstandings, such as history is mired with and which our newspapers proclaim almost daily. On the other hand, the record of materialist ideologies like communism, socialism and capitalism has not been better, and has similarly resulted in exploitation and violence sometimes on a large scale. Most importantly, none of us appears to be content thinking that this is the only life that we possess.

Religion in the true sense is a means of discovering that Divine reality within us, not a dogma defining what God is outside of ourselves. Such religion is not an organized belief system but a set of spiritual practices to be adapted on an individual basis. These practices include the full range of human approaches to the Divine, the paths of Knowledge (Jnana Yoga), Devotion (Bhakti Yoga), Service (Karma Yoga) and Meditation Techniques (Raja Yoga). While we should discard religion in the outer sense as organized dogma and social conditioning, we should embrace religion in the inner sense as Yoga and meditation. Otherwise our lives will have no enduring meaning and we will take nothing with us at death but frustration and sorrow.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF RELIGION? Religion, as it occurs in the world, contains two aspects. First, religions teach certain moral and ethical principles which reflect a greater universal ethics. Religion tells us not to be selfish, not to harm others, not to lie, steal, or cheat, but to do good, to be helpful, compassionate, and thoughtful. These are universal human values that all societies require to some degree in order to function at all. While the details of such principles vary in different religions, all religions contain them to some degree.

Second, religions contain an aspect of dogma. They brand certain actions wrong not because they violate any universal ethics but because they go against a particular belief which is limited to one group only. For example, if a religion tells us that it is a sin not to go to church on a particular day,

that it is wrong to call upon God by another name than the one sanctioned by the religion, or that it is heretical to think that God is not limited to a particular prophet or incarnation, these are not statements of universal truth but the tyranny of a belief. They are dogmas which are not universally true but reflect only the opinion of a particular group. These dogmas end up promoting actions that violate universal ethics, causing us to mistrust and mistreat those who do not subscribe to them, dividing humanity into the godly believers and the ungodly or demonic non-believers who must be converted or conquered.

The first aspect of religion, universal ethics, is preliminary to the spiritual path and the very the foundation for it. The second side, theological dogma, is harmful to the spiritual path, and contradicts the first side of religion. It is spiritually unethical to insist that one sins by questioning religious dogma, or that by not following the prescriptions of a particular religious belief one has done an act of the same negative nature as harming another person.

Organized religion combines the nectar of universal ethics with the poison of exclusive belief. Unless we can sift the nectar from the poison, such religion will harm our spiritual potential. Following universal ethics completely, like the principles of truthfulness and non-violence, we can take what is good in religion and dispense with what is not.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RELIGION AND INNER SPIRITUALITY?

Religion and spirituality are not the same thing as many of us have discovered. Religion at best serves to provide ethical training and shows various outer ways of worshipping the Divine through rituals and prayers, which can help maintain harmony in society. True spirituality consists of internal attitudes and practices that lead to Self-realization.

Today the world needs not a new religion but a universal spirituality. A universal spirituality, a sense of Sanatana Dharma, will take what is of value in all religions and not circumscribe us within the field of any one of them. It will emphasize spiritual practices over all dogma and ideology.

To achieve the real goal of life we should follow an enlightenment path, a path founded by Self-realized sages which leads to Self-realization. All that is called religion does not do this. The outer dimension of religion, which is belief and ritual, is at most preliminary to the inner dimension, which is meditation. We must recognize the value of the inner teachings and cease to emphasize outer differences of names and forms.

WHY SHOULD WE FOLLOW ANY TRADITION AT ALL?

Religious tradition has often been a negative factor in the world. It sets up various authorities and conditioning patterns that stifle individual intelligence and creativity. It establishes vested interests who war with one other to control the minds of people. It appears that we would be better off without it. However, if we look deeply, we see that such criticisms do not apply to tradition itself, which is continuity in a field of knowledge, but to authoritarianism, which is not even beneficial for maintaining a living tradition.

It is not possible to avoid tradition. We must develop teachings that grow and continue with time. This development through time itself becomes tradition. As soon as a teaching endures beyond the lifetime of a teacher it becomes a tradition. Or as soon as it expands beyond the teachings of one person, it becomes a tradition. One person in isolation cannot accomplish much in any field. Without a tradition of science to work from, what can one person do in the name of science, for example? Just as we need continuity, which is tradition, in other branches of learning, so we must have it in the spiritual realm. Otherwise each person is compelled to start from the beginning.

Culture and intelligence are collectively developed phenomena. They are the product of many people working together over a long period of time. Tradition is important in all that we do.

Language, for example, cannot be developed by one person alone. It is part of a great collective effort. A comprehensive and open spiritual tradition is the need of our times. Tradition provides a guideline of experience to help us grow. Yet tradition must be kept open and alive and not become rigid or authoritarian. For this it must base itself not on fixed forms but on living spiritual experience. Tradition should be a field of resources for all to benefit from, not a set of dogmas no one is allowed to question.

ARENíT ALL RELIGIONS THE SAME? Because there is a unity of truth behind all religious seeking and because there is a commonality in the religious experience, some people have come to the conclusion that all religions are basically the same ó that it doesnít matter if one goes to a temple, church or mosque, or whether one prays, fasts or meditates. They believe that as long as one is doing something that can be called religious, one will get to the same goal only along a different route.

Let us compare this with the field of art. Because there is a unity of the human creative experience behind all art does not mean that all art is the same, and it certainly does not mean that all that is called art is good art. Similarly, that there is a unity of scientific inquiry behind all scientific pursuits does not mean that all science is the same, that all scientific theories are correct and lead to the same conclusions, or that it does not matter what experimental procedures we employ.

There is a tremendous gap between organized religion, which divides people, and the religious experience, which unites them. And the religious experience itself has different stages, levels and variations. All religious experiences are not merely equal or the same. There are many gradations between ordinary human consciousness and Self-realization, which should not all be lumped together. Religious type experiences can even occur in an impure or untrained mind and be mixed with egoism and delusion. Moreover, there is a diversity of spiritual practices, like the Yogas of Knowledge and Devotion, which proceed by different lines and have their own characteristic experiences. While we should recognize the general unity of the religious experience, we should also acknowledge its diversity and multileveled nature.

That all religions are one is a statement similar to that all water is one. This does not mean that all water is the same. That all water is one does not mean that it is not necessary to carefully consider the quality of the water we drink. There are religious doctrines and practices, which are outward or preliminary value and others that are limited, inappropriate for us or even wrong. To discover the real truth of religion requires a great deal of discrimination, a discerning of the essence, not merely an equation of outer forms.

ARENíT ALL RELIGIONS ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO THE SAME TRUTH?

One may recognize that differences exist between various religions but consider these to be merely various alternatives, just as different roads may lead to the same goal. This is true of religious teachings that have inner values and practices of meditation and Self-realization, but differ in outer factors of name and form, like different enlightenment or Self-realization traditions. We can consider these to be different approaches to the same truth. However, there are religious teachings that differ in fundamental values, goals and practices, not merely in outer names and forms. These cannot be merely alternative ways to the same reality.

For example, we can recognize that there are many different names for fire. Calling fire by a different name does not mean that one does not understand the nature of fire. But this is not to say that fire can differ in its essential nature and qualities, that for some people fire is hot and for other people it can be cold. While formal differences can be reconciled, substantial differences cannot. Truth must be the same. It cannot vary according to the varying beliefs and opinions of human beings.

When religious differences are merely a matter of words or forms, we can recognize a common

truth behind them. If one religion calls the ultimate reality love, another calls its truth, another calls it the infinite, we can accept a common reality behind all these different formulations. But when religious teachings have differences of a substantive nature, we cannot accept their varying views as equally true. For example, the law of karma and rebirth leading to bondage or liberation cannot be equally true as that of sin or salvation leading to and eternal heaven or hell because these two views are substantially different. One may try to reconcile them in various ways, but one view must end up as the real truth.

The goal is to discover the supreme truth, not merely to uphold religion as we know it as truth. Religion at best is an expedient measure to aid us in the pursuit of truth. It should never be made an end-in-itself. If it is a question of religion or truth, we should always follow truth.

CAN ONE FOLLOW ALL SPIRITUAL PATHS? There are a number of spiritual paths which provide meditation practices that can, if applied with the proper background and guidance, lead to union with the Divine or the inner Self. In addition, it is good to know something about a number of the worldís spiritual traditions in order to broaden oneís mental horizon, just as it is good to know something of the different cultures and customs of various lands and peoples.

However, one does not have the time to follow out the practices of all teachings, which require a certain period of application in order to work properly. For oneís actual meditation practice one has to choose a certain approach and a connection with specific teachers, generally within the same tradition.

We can compare this with any field of learning. One can recognize the validity of all true artistic approaches, but one cannot practice all techniques of art. One cannot be simultaneously a sculptor, painter, musician and dancer, in ancient, medieval and modern styles. In oneís actual practice one will have to make a choice and follow it out. Moreover, the aim of a spiritual practice is not to learn various traditions but to know oneself, and for this the teaching is a guideline, not the goal. To be a true artist one does not need to study all forms of art but only to discover oneís own inner creativity. If we spend our time exploring different teachings and traditions, rather than looking into who we really are, we have missed the point. The important thing is to reach the goal, not to explore the paths.

WHAT DO ALL HINDUS BELIEVE? Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma does not emphasize a particular code of beliefs that divides humanity into believers and non-believers. It does not begin with the assertion ìI believe in Godî but with the recognition ìGod or truth and my true nature are one.î It does not state that only those of our faith can find God but that God or truth is the nature of all beings. It does not have articles of faith, like the belief in various miracles or special revelations, but directs us to discover the supreme truth, which we can experience in our own consciousness as clearly as we can see the sun rise in the morning.

Hinduism is not centered in a particular name or form but on the truth which lies behind all names and forms. It is an open tradition that encourages a diversity of approaches, not a monolithic religion consisting of a standard creed. Its emphasis is Dharma or universal truth that one can perceive, not belief, which may appear contrary to the nature of things. Hinduism recognizes not only the unity of the Divine but the infinity of truth.

The principles which all Hindus accept are not articles of faith but dharmas or natural laws. Such are the law of karma, rebirth, the existence of a cosmic Lord (Ishvara) and universal intelligence, the beneficence of the world of nature, and Selfrealization as the ultimate goal of life. Hindus similarly share common practices like ritual, prayer, pilgrimage, charity, Yoga and meditation but there is no prescribed system of activities that all Hindus must follow. There are common Hindu values and attitudes like non-violence, truthfulness, and self-discipline, which are more important than these

practices.

Hindu practices are employed as ways of finding truth, not as dogmas that tell us what that truth is supposed to be. Sanatana Dharma tells us that it is more important to give people the means to find truth themselves, rather than to tell them what truth is supposed to be. As truth is our own nature, the best way to let it come forth is to no longer impose any external influences upon it.

Many people, who may not formally regard themselves as Hindus, may have a Hindu view of reality. This is because the Hindu view is not a sectarian view but the view of the whole, which is that One Self is all.

ISNíT THE UNIVERSAL TRADITION MORE THAN HINDUISM?

The question assumes that Hinduism is a limiting factor for a universal tradition, which it does not have to be. Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma does not separate itself off from the universal tradition. It is simply asking us to recognize the universal tradition and apply it in our own lives.

Hinduism welcomes the search for a universal tradition and the inclusion in it of all spiritual aspiration. But it says that such a tradition must be created through spiritual experience by following the teachings of Self-realized sages. It cannot be put together only on an intellectual level, nor simply built up outwardly as an organization. It is not a matter of combining all the spiritual traditions together in the same place or in the same book but of having the realization of universal truth ourselves. This only occurs within the individual who has transcended all outer seeking. It cannot be accomplished en masse by any group or organization.

If Hinduism is seen in its true light as Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition, then whoever honors that universal truth is also a true Hindu, regardless of the names and forms of their religious life. Hinduism includes not only the religions of this world but those of the different planes of consciousness up to the Absolute. It is not only the religion of one incarnation of but all our births, whether in this world or another.

SHOULDNíT WESTERNERS FOLLOW A WESTERN RELIGION?

Some people in the western world believe that eastern religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, have no place in the West, which should follow western religions like Christianity and Islam. Such people do not understand that eastern dharmic traditions are not religious belief systems but universal ways of spiritual knowledge.

We note a curious cultural prejudice here. Those born in the West do not mind if western religions like Christianity and Islam are adopted by peoples in eastern countries. Westerners are not asking Christian missionaries to be recalled from Asia because the western Christian religion is not appropriate for eastern people. Westerners do not think that it is wrong for western religion or for western art and culture to go to the East. Yet they call their systems ìwesternî and want to maintain their geographical purity when so-called ìeasternî teachings gain recognition in the so-called West.

If western religions are going to be exported to the eastern world, eastern religions can also be imported to the West, just as the movement of trade must go in both directions. What is important is to take the best in human culture whatever its origin. We donít refuse a peach because it comes from what was originally a Chinese tree. So too, we should not refuse meditation teachings because other cultures have developed them better than our culture has.

And why should it be a problem for us if anyone finds spiritual benefit from a teaching that arises outside of their given cultural context? After all spiritual knowledge transcends limitations of time and space. Western culture has not traditionally given emphasis to spiritual knowledge such as has occurred in the East. That many westerners have found benefit from eastern spiritual teachings is a fact which should be honored. It would be cultural chauvinism to deny it.

True religion, whether it predominates in the eastern or western parts of the globe, is not a matter of geography. All the religions of the world are followed in areas far beyond the geographical locale of their origin. Religion speaks of the ultimate issues of life and death and should orient us to the eternal and the universal. In this respect, Hinduism with its universal view has greater relevance for all human beings than any belief system which divides humanity into believers and non-believers.

ISNíT A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO SPIRITUALITY NEEDED?

Without a rational and scientific approach to the spiritual life, the spiritual life becomes dogma or superstition. Yet to scientifically approach the spiritual life is different than to scientifically approach the world of nature. The Divine, being the infinite and eternal, cannot be observed in a laboratory, dissected on a table, or seen in a telescope or a microscope. It requires an inner scientific approach to discover, which means directly observing the workings of our own minds. It rests on the ability to discriminate between the eternal and the transient and to focus oneís awareness on the eternal.

The beauty of dharmic traditions is that they have maintained a scientific approach to the spiritual life that can be used by everyone. Yet the spiritual life is not merely a science, it is also an art, and must be approached with sensitivity and creativity. The spiritual aspect of life is the most subtle and requires the appropriate subtlety of mind to discover. It cannot, like an object on the table, be obvious to our outer vision. The science of Yoga is such a rational approach to spirituality that we must develop on a global basis. We do this by taking up the practices and seeing how they really work.

WHAT IS THE ANCIENT WESTERN VEDIC HERITAGE?

The western world has had many connections with dharmic traditions through history. At an early ancient period, we see a commonality of language, culture and religion between the European and the Vedic. For example, there are many terms in common between English and Sanskrit: mother-matar, fatherpitar, brother-bhratar, and sister-svaser. There are many European and Vedic equivalent names for God: Divine-Deva, Zeus-Dyaus, Jupiter-Dyaus Pitar, or Uranus-Varuna.

The Greek and Roman reverence for the Gods and Goddesses through temple worship is of the same order as the kind of worship that goes on in temples in India today. Ancient Celtic traditions are yet closer to the Vedic in their forms and practices, particularly in the mysticism of the Druids. The Germanic, Baltic and Slavic traditions have many Vedic affinities as well. At the original core of indigenous European culture is a Vedic affinity or perhaps even a Vedic identity.

Westerners need not regard the Vedic heritage as simply eastern; it is universal and also part of an older European heritage that can again be reclaimed. The hold of the exclusive religions of the Middle Ages ó which suppressed mysticism and spirituality along with their eastern connections ó is coming to an end. The study of our ancient western Vedic heritage is one of the most important areas of historical research today and is crucial for reclaiming the spiritual foundations of western culture.

DONíT WE NEED PRACTICES DESIGNED FOR US TODAY?

We need spiritual teachings appropriate for our changing circumstances, wherever we may live. For this it is essential to follow a living spiritual tradition, not a dead and stereotyped belief that ties us to some by-gone era as the ultimate. Yet as the goal of the spiritual life is the eternal, the teaching must be grounded in timeless reality and not merely be a fad of the moment. The forms we follow should be based on the eternal truth but adjusted according to the needs of the times.

The universal teaching is a science of Self-realization. To know ourselves is the most important thing, whatever our cultural or geographical background. That Self transcends time, space and objectivity. Yet it is important to connect with a living tradition of Self-knowledge, so that we can find a teacher and teaching suitable for our temperament.

Moreover, Self-knowledge creates a certain culture and way of life. It creates an awareness of our posture, from which the science of asana or yogic postures arose. It creates an awareness of breath, from which the science of pranayama arose. It creates an awareness of speech, from which the Sanskrit language arose. It creates a science of health, from which Ayurveda arose. It creates an understanding of symbol and ritual, from which the science of puja (Hindu ritual) arose. A culture of Self-knowledge is useful and this is the essence of Sanatana Dharma. Naturally it has to be continually adjusted individually and collectively, but it has always done this.

What the West, and each part of the world for that matter, needs is a living tradition of higher consciousness, which goes back to enlightened and Self-realized teachers. Since the West has not preserved such a tradition in its culture, it must connect up with traditions from those parts of the world in which it is still vibrant. Sanatana Dharma, offering such enlightened traditions, without insisting upon the adaptation of an exclusive religious identity, is a good basis for this.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF A YOGIC TRADITION?

Spiritual traditions exist to various degrees and for various purposes. What is necessary is a comprehensive spiritual tradition that contains a complete and practical science of Selfrealization. Fragmentary, broken or incomplete spiritual and occult traditions have some benefit but are usually not be sufficient for full realization.

A comprehensive spiritual tradition must contain all the different paths of knowledge, devotion, yogic technique and service and in the proper proportion. It must recognize the importance of posture, breath, mantra and meditation. It must employ the use of ritual, form and image, as well as direct, formless and imageless approaches. It must be based upon an understanding of the law of karma and the process of rebirth. Yet it must be free of fixation upon any particular personality, book, name or idea. And it must be connected to teachers who have realized this truth. The advantage of the yogic tradition is that it is such a complete spiritual tradition applied to all human temperaments, and through thousands of years of experience.

CAN I KEEP MY EXISTING RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND STILL PRACTICE YOGA?

Yogic practices are designed to lead us to the universal truth, which is pure consciousness. However, to do so they must cause us to question dogmas and limited beliefs of all kinds. This means that if the goal of oneís religion is Selfrealization than one can freely follow that religion along with yogic paths to Self-realization. If the goal of oneís religion is less than that, then oneís religion is at best a preliminary step.

To know oneís Self one must go beyond all theories, beliefs, names and forms, all the movements of the conditioned mind. We do not need to depend upon any belief. Rather we should learn to believe in ourselves, in our nature as pure consciousness that does not require an external support. Only then can we abide in our true nature. Usually one has to give up oneís outer religious belief to find the inner truth, or at least make it into something secondary. All religions belong to the Self, but the Self cannot be limited to any religious identity.

IS YOGA HINDU?

Yoga is the science of meditation that appears in Hinduism as the essence of its spiritual practices. Yoga is not merely postures but includes pranayama, mantra and meditation approaches. Yoga is an integral part of Sanatana Dharma or the eternal tradition, its very way of action.

Yet whether we regard Yoga as Hindu depends upon what we understand Hinduism to be. If we follow the superficial and stereotyped view that Hinduism is an ethnic religion, then Yoga, which is a universal science, goes far beyond Hinduism, however intimately it may be related to it.

However, if we understand Hinduism relative to Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition,

which is its true reality, then we see that Yoga and Sanatana Dharma must always go together. Yoga as union with universal consciousness is the practice of Sanatana Dharma as the universal path. Just as Sanatana Dharma leads us to universality; so does Yoga. Sanatana Dharma is the greater science and culture of Yoga, its application to all aspects of life.

IS NOT YOGA ENOUGH, WHY SHOULD WE TALK OF HINDUISM?

Yoga and Vedanta, which are the ways of spiritual practice and Self-knowledge, are the most important aspects of Sanatana Dharma, its inner dimension. Yet the outer dimension of Hinduism is relevant because it presents a way of life and an understanding of the entire universe in harmony with this inner knowledge.

Ayurveda, Vedic astrology, Vastu, Sanskrit, Vedic and Tantric rituals, and Hindu music and dance are important factors in building a spiritual culture. They reflect a spiritual understanding that can penetrate into all dimensions of life, so all that we do individually and collectively supports the spiritual quest. It is not enough just to have spiritual practices. We need a culture and way of life that allows them to flourish. Hinduism provides that in abundance.

IS HINDUISM OF VALUE FOR WESTERNERS? Many people in the western world are fed up with organized religions, churches and dogmas. What attracts them in eastern religions is that these are not organized religions emphasizing dogma, sin or salvation, but offer individualized spiritual practices outside of fixed belief systems. However, though westerners may be happy to adapt aspects of Hinduism like various systems of Yoga and meditation, they may feel no need to become Hindus in the religious sense, which they may equate with the same religious problems that they are seeking to get beyond.

Western spiritual seekers should realize that Hinduism is not a belief system seeking converts. It is not striving to narrow down our sense of who we are or what we can do. It is a set of spiritual resources, carefully gathered since the most ancient times, which is available, like a wonderful set of tools, to help us build our own inner life.

If we understand Hinduism as a universal tradition, as Sanatana Dharma, which shows how spirituality can be integrated into the whole of life, then it can be of great value for reformulating a global spiritual culture today. Just as those born in the East have to recognize the validity of modern science for all humanity, so Westerners may have to recognize the validity or Yoga or spiritual science, which is the essence of Hinduism, for the entire world.

ARENíT THERE MANY THINGS WRONG WITH
MODERN HINDUISM?

There may be much that is wrong in modern India, including various social inequities, but this is a distortion of the Hindu Dharma which teaches that society should function as a single organism for the benefit of all. To recognize the value of Sanatana Dharma, we need not blind our eyes to social, moral or spiritual errors in any religion or culture. On the contrary, it becomes the responsibility of one who recognizes the universal Dharma to promote it in all possible ways, not only in oneself but in oneís outer life.

However, to reject the spiritual side of the Hindu tradition because of outer problems associated with Indian society today is a great mistake. One should use the great gurus of Hindu Dharma as role models, not the society of modern India which is the product of many trends, of which a real application of Hindu Dharma is not as central as most people think. Modern India has been dominated by social, political and economic trends from the western world, primarily socialism much like that of Eastern Europe, with now capitalism coming back into prominence.

It is not the yogic science of Self-realization that has caused the social problems in India but the

same materialism and corruption that has created problems in every country. In fact, there is no country in the world today that is not facing tremendous problems, not just from lack of social development but from excess affluence and consumerism in the countries that are already developed.

SHOULD ONE FORMALLY BECOME A HINDU? As a universal approach, the teachings of the Hindu tradition do not require a particular outer religious affiliation but only that we live a truthful life. One does not have to formally become a Hindu in order to receive the inner teachings of Yoga and meditation. All that we need is a sincere aspiration to discover God or truth.

However, it can be very helpful to actually become a Hindu because it provides one a formal connection to the worldís oldest continually existing enlightenment tradition. It brings one into the family of the rishis and yogis and connects us directly with their grace and guidance. It is more than just being part of a Yoga lineage; it is being part of an entire network of such lineages.

We grow in life relative to the associations we make, particularly at the level of the heart. To enter into an association with the sages is the best thing, particularly with a tradition that embraces spiritual knowledge of all types. But we must put these teachings into practice for this association to be really meaningful.

WONíT A PERSON LOSE THEIR WESTERN IDENTITY BY BECOMING A HINDU?
Becoming a Hindu is not taking on an exclusive religious belief that cuts one off from other points of view. It is a means of opening up to the universal and eternal tradition (Sanatana Dharma).

We should ask, are we really westerners or easterners? We are human beings first of all and the legacy of all humanity belongs to us. Identity is something that we are going to lose anyway. Identity is what blocks our understanding of the eternal. Our true identity is in consciousness, not in any cultural association, even of a religious nature.

We should adopt whatever furthers our spiritual life, not just meditation practices but all forms of culture, knowledge and behavior, wherever we may find it. Whatever we assume through this attitude is not a divisive identity but a way of action in harmony with the universe. Should people recognize their connection with Sanatana Dharma and its great stream of teachers and teachings, it can only be good. It will strengthen our true identity in the Self and not cause us to lose anything that really belongs to us.

B. Civilization and Social Issues

WHAT IS SANATANA DHARMAíS VIEW OF CIVILIZATION?

According to the universal view of Sanatana Dharma, civilization should be the progressive unfoldment of the capacities of the soul toward the ultimate goal of Selfrealization. The soul through evolution of both body and mind gradually develops the powers of the senses, emotion, and intelligence until it can discover its true nature as pure consciousness. The entire universe is a development of real civilization as the culture of consciousness which is the supreme reality.

Plants and animals have their societies and forms of communication. Civilization or culture is not unique to human beings or to this planet but occurs everywhere in the universe. Yet human civilization has its particular role. Human civilization should be the culture of spiritual aspiration through which we seek to embody the universal consciousness in our creaturely existence. This is neither the culture of religious belief nor that of materialistic science. It requires seeking the infinite in a rational, sensitive and experiential manner, not the promotion of an institution, ideology or type of behavior as final. True culture begins with the spiritual life and is based upon honoring the sages who have realized their true nature, who are the greatest and most important of human beings for us to study and to emulate.

HOW DOES HINDUISM VIEW WESTERN CIVILIZATION?

Western civilization is a comparatively recent phenomenon compared to older spiritual cultures like the Hindu that go back over five thousand years. Prior to what we know of as history, Sanatana Dharma recognizes previous world ages or yugas going back far our culture would regard as the primitive era. For Hindus the modern era began with the Buddha some 2500 years ago, when what was for them the ancient era ended. Similarly, Hindus view Christianity and Islam as new religions, which have yet to entirely develop the depth and tolerance that experience teaches.

According to Hindu thinkers, western civilization is still immature and at an adolescent phase in which personal pleasure and sensory indulgence are the most important values, what are called Kama or desire in Hindu thought. Even western religions are caught in a physical view of reality and look to some heavenly world as their goal, which is often little more than a glorified physical world.

Western civilization has produced a few genuine mystics, particularly in the Middle Ages, but no enduring science of Self-realization and yogic practice. Western has so far failed to produce a science of consciousness, though it is taking a turn in this direction. Western art has also floundered without firm spiritual roots and commonly become a mere personal expression, not connecting us with the cosmic powers which true art is meant to do.

The problem is that western civilization and its adolescent values are destroying the planet and its deeper cultural traditions. However, there are positive trends in western civilization, with a gradual casting off the boundaries of medieval religions and modern nation states towards a planetary view of existence. Western civilization at least has a freedom of inquiry and curiosity about the world that must lead toward deeper knowledge in time. This may take decades, if not centuries to develop and can be hastened by a greater receptivity to the Himalayan sages. Western thinkers should remain humble and not get trapped in the arrogance of the intellect, so this development can occur quicker and with less suffering.

HOW CAN WE INTEGRATE EAST AND WEST? We must bring together what is best in both East and West and not merely throw them together randomly. The better part of the eastern world is its inner spirituality of Yoga and meditation. The better part of the western world is its science and humanitarianism.

The western world has made many gains in the outer world through science and technology. The eastern world, particularly India, has made similar gains in the inner world, developing the science of Yoga and meditation. For a complete human development both the inner and the outer sides of our nature must be considered. As long as the outer side of the human being is not developed ó as long as we are living in poverty, disease and ignorance of the forces of nature ó the inner side of the human being, the cultivation of awareness must be limited. On the other hand, as long as the inner side of the human being is not developed ó as long as we have no science of deeper consciousness ó the outer side of the human being, however well-developed through science and technology, cannot find true happiness.

This does not mean that there has been nothing of spiritual value in the western world or nothing of scientific value in the East. It is a matter of proportion. The greatest integration will occur when we recognize that East and West are just the two sides of our own nature that embraces the entire universe.

CAN WE LOOK UP TO A RELIGION FROM AS BACKWARD COUNTRY AS INDIA?

Many religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, originated in cultures which were not materially affluent. Most of the great founders of important religious movements were poor or gave up their wealth. Hinduism has been criticized as a religion because of the poverty of modern India. Such thinking equates the truth of religion with wealth, which is not a matter of religion at all.

It also judges human spiritual aspiration and its social expression according to a particular period of human history. There were long periods when Hindus were wealthier than Christians during the Middle Ages and ancient times. Does this mean that Hinduism was then the true religion and then ceased to be so when Hindus lost their wealth? What kind of religion would that be? In addition, many Hindus are now becoming wealthy. Hindus in the United States and Great Britain are the most affluent of the minorities. Does this mean that we should now look upon Hinduism in a favorable light?

No religion teaches that wealth and spirituality are the same, or that the spiritual development of a person is indicated by how much money or property he or she may possess. Yet this is what we do on a social level when we judge the religions of countries by their current economic status. Just as wealth in an individual is no necessary guarantee or indication of spirituality, so it is with countries. Such concepts only show how deeply we are attached to the outer world and its possessions. It is not surprising that our religions are more economic interests than spiritual paths. True religion is based upon renunciation, which is a giving up of attachment to name, fame and possession.

WHY IS INDIA SOCIALLY BACKWARD? As Hinduism has been the main religion of India for thousands of years, there is a tendency to identify the backward social condition of India with Hinduism. However, we should note that modern India has not formulated itself according to the principles of Sanatana Dharma, but in its original constitution declared itself to be a socialist state. Not surprisingly, India is suffering from many of the same problems of other socialist and communist states and their stifling bureaucracies.

Moreover, India has been under foreign domination for many centuries. It was ruled by the Muslims from around 1200, then the British from 1757, and only independent since 1947. Though the majority of people in India are Hindus and its recent political leaders have been primarily of Hindu ancestry, there has been little of the Hindu religion and its spiritual values in the political or educational systems, particularly since Mahatma Gandhi.

There are other problems in modern Hindu society like child marriage, and dowry deaths. These are social evils. To associate them with Hinduism as a religion would be like to associate the widespread use of drugs and sexual promiscuity with the predominant Christian religion of the West today. These problems are based upon a lack of education, overpopulation, and a social inertia arising from centuries of foreign domination.

Poverty and related evils occur in Christian, Islamic and Buddhist, as well as Hindu countries. Yet because India is the only Hindu majority country (with the exception of Nepal), there is a greater tendency to identify its problems with the religion. We donít identify the poverty in the Philippines, for example, with its Catholic religion. Nor do we identify the success of Japan with its Buddhist-Shinto religion.

We should address the real causes of poverty throughout the world, which are generally educational and economic, but not confuse them with the spiritual life, whose aim is not merely to improve society materially but to bring us into contact with the immeasurable.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF ECONOMICS? The economic problems in India today have largely been caused by the socialist policies of modern India, which are akin to the economic problems of the Soviet Union. Socialist countries make individuals dependent upon the state for their welfare, which suppresses initiative and independence in the economic life of the people.

Hindu Dharma teaches independence (svatantra) in all domains of life and acknowledges the validity of the commercial (vaishya) class and its freedom to pursue prosperity as a valid goal of life. Hinduism teaches the individual to be self-sufficient and confident of his or her own Divinity. It does

not make the individual subordinate to the state. Similarly, it does not make the individual subordinate to big business but encourages an organic development of economic resources allowing all people dignity of work, and maintaining maximum economic independence for all communities.

The Hindu concept of Dharma contains an understanding of the proper role and limitation of the merchant class which should serve society, not rule it, following the guidance of sages and yogis. Commercial development is alright if it is based upon respect for the Earth, charity for all people, and respect for the spiritual life. Otherwise it can become a curse, as it has over much of the world today.

HOW SHOULD HINDUS RELATE TO WESTERN CULTURE?

Western culture is primarily a secular and commercial culture. Its main benefit is its practical efficiency, scientific knowledge and humanitarianism. Its main limitation is its attachment to sensation and entertainment, which dull the mind. While the scientific and humanitarian side of western culture can be helpful, its lack of spiritual knowledge must be compensated for.

Western culture, though it has religion, is not a religious culture. On one hand, this largely frees western culture from religious dogma, intolerance and bigotry that makes life difficult in countries dominated by a single religious belief. On the other hand, it leaves western culture in a spiritual vacuum, without spiritual roots, which may deprive people of a deeper connection with life or the Divine.

Hindu culture is not a religious culture in the sense of an exclusive belief. It has a universal and open minded approach. Yet it is not a materialistic culture. It is based upon spiritual and yogic values and practices, a tradition of sadhana or spiritual practice. Therefore, Hinduism does not have to clash with what is beneficial in western culture but can add a spiritual dimension to it. Hindus should take what is useful from western culture but offer in return a deeper approach to the spiritual life and the culture of consciousness.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF MODERN SCIENCE? Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma, a universal way of knowledge, does not require that we reject science or return to medieval superstitions. For example, Hinduism does not require that we believe that the world was created six thousand years ago, nor is it opposed to the theory of evolution, which it long ago formulated in a spiritual way as an evolution not merely of form but of consciousness.

Sanatana Dharma recognizes the validity of all forms of knowledge. Yet it says that knowledge is of two types. The lower knowledge ó based on name, form and number ó can only help us understand the outer world. It cannot reveal our true nature or help us discover the Eternal. This lower knowledge is the realm of science, which is based upon measurement and observation of the external. It allows us to understand and control the forces of nature. The higher knowledge, which is yogic spirituality, is based upon meditation and direct perception of the workings of the mind. This alone brings liberation and the attainment of immortality, through which one goes beyond the realm of time and space.

Though science has its place, it has its limitation, and where material science ends the spiritual science, which is Yoga, begins. To be truly scientific or objective, we must recognize both levels of truth and afford each its respective place. The dialogue between these two forms of science is crucial for the future development of humanity and for developing a real and comprehensive understanding of the universe.

WILL SCIENCE AND YOGIC SPIRITUALITY BE
RECONCILED?

While modern science has yet to recognize the higher yogic science, it has begun to move in that

direction. The mechanistic or Newtonian view of the universe is now dead. The idea of the universe as energy which supplanted it, the Einsteinian view, is also coming in to question. The idea of the universe as consciousness is now being seriously considered by many scientists. It is only a matter of time, which could be a little as a few decades, for this idea to be validated in scientific experiments. Once this occurs, modern scientists will have to seriously consider the knowledge and practices of yogic scientists and their knowledge on the inner levels of the mind. The material and spiritual sciences will have to meet and create an integral science for all humanity including both in their proper place.

Sanatana Dharma is an eternal tradition. However much humanity may move away from its teachings, it must return to them in the course of time. Sanatana Dharma requires freedom of inquiry, which science has also developed on a mundane level. Such freedom of examination must be brought into the workings of the mind and soul, so that by questioning our very ego we can discover our true Self beyond all sorrow. This Selfrealization is the ultimate scientific achievement for all people. It requires the development of a spiritual psychology, a science of consciousness, including higher states of awareness, which alone can bridge the gap between science and religion.

HOW DOES HINDUISM VIEW THE WOMENíS MOVEMENT?

The womenís movement or feminism is largely a political and intellectual movement to provide women with the same social and economic rights, education and intellectual expression that have been given to men. It is part of various political movements that have occurred in the world for providing social justice to different groups that have been historically oppressed or discriminated against.

Hinduism has presented the world with a well-developed tradition of Goddess worship and with many great women saints, sages and yoginis, which tradition is still flourishing today. This tradition is not merely a political ideology or religious belief but based on a direct experience of the Divine Mother and her cosmic powers by various practitioners. It is a matter of the inner heart (devotion), though it does have its philosophies.

However, women have been kept subordinate in most traditional Hindu societies and not allowed them to develop their intelligence as freely as men, keeping them at times backward. This is a fall from Sanatana Dharma, which teaches us to honor the feminine principle, and has been one of the causes for the decline in Hinduism that has occurred through the centuries.

The modern feminist movement has been helpful in upholding the material and intellectual rights of women. However, it also needs to reclaim a true womenís spirituality or path of Self-realization, which its political and materialistic values may not always understand. Fortunately, many women are looking in a spiritual direction and for this taking interest in the experiential forms of spirituality, such as Hinduism, in which the Goddess still lives and communicates to us. The encounter of the womenís movement with the living Goddess through Hinduism has the capacity to transform humanity.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF THE EARTH? Hindus worship the Earth as a Goddess and form of the Divine Mother. They recognize that the Earth is not just a material thing but a cosmic power pervaded with a Divine Presence. They honor all creatures on Earth and the various beauties of the planet, the mountains, rivers, forests and oceans, which contain many sacred places for them wherever they live.

This worship of the Earth is not part of a primitive pantheism but part of a greater cosmic awareness which recognizes the Divine not only in Heaven but in the very ground on which we stand. Such a recognition of the Divine in the Earth is essential in the world today wherein we are destroying the planet. For Hindus ecology is not merely a social movement but part of religion, and

for them religion is also ecological. If we view the Earth as a Goddess and as our Mother we will certainly use her resources correctly. If we fail to do this, we will abuse not only the Earth but all creatures on it.

HOW DOES HINDUISM VIEW THE ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENT?

The ecological movement represents one of the most idealistic and progressive sides of the modern psyche. It encourages us to respect the sacred nature of all life and reconnect with the unity of existence. It also helps foster both new attitudes and new technologies that can help us live at peace both with our fellow human beings and with all the creatures around us. Given the current ecological crisis on the planet, an ecological perspective is necessary in all that we do. The entire future of our planet depends upon it.

Hinduism is inherently an ecological religion. It finds a Divine presence everywhere in nature and allows us to link up to the cosmic mind. It honors and worships the Earth as a personification of the Divine Mother. Hindu rituals present a scientific means of connecting to all the powers of nature, though which we can restore our ecological balance. Yoga itself is based on a philosophy of integration, which is the very movement of life seeking greater and greater wholeness. It demands an ecological aspect to all of life.

However, many modern Hindus do not take an ecological view of life, or understand the ecological dimension of Hindu thought. For this reason, there has been a degradation even of Hindu sacred sites in India, notably in the Himalayas. Hindus need to reclaim the ecological background of their tradition and use to restore their natural environments, to make the world a suitable temple for the Divine awareness that pervades all of natureís beauty and bounty.

WHY DO HINDUS REVERE COWS? It is curious how we approach the religion of others by reacting to what for us appear to be the lowest or most objectionable side of what they do. Predominant western religions have conditioned people not to respect the so-called lower forms of life and to think that those who do so are somehow primitive or superstitious.

The cow is a symbol of Divine love and grace. With no thought of itself, but out of love, like the Divine Mother, it produces milk which nourishes other creatures. Respect for the cow is meant to instill the virtues of gentleness and receptivity into the human mind. Hindus do not worship cows. The cow to them is a great symbol of cosmic beneficence.

We can judge how a culture values the spiritual life by how it treats its cows. By this standard modern culture, which not only eats cows but raises them under artificial and cruel circumstances, is quite deficient in any deeper sensitivity. We should not only revere cows but respect all life, particularly those beings that function selflessly.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF VEGETARIANISM IN HINDUISM?

Most religions strive to reduce the consumption of meat or to turn it into a sacred ritual to be done with care. Some religions turn the eating of meat into a sacrifice, a religious ritual that requires special preparation, a practice found in many native traditions like those of the American Indians. They make sure to use all parts of the animal and to ask for forgiveness for their action of harming the creature. Only meat that is appropriately sanctified is considered proper for eating. Such meat consumption is very different than our modern commercial culture, in which animals are raised in a brutal and mechanical way for the meat industry.

Hinduism promotes vegetarianism particularly for monks and for those who want to devote themselves to the spiritual life. Eating of meat is not allowed in Hindu temples and religious institutions and is restricted during Hindu holidays. However, Hinduism does not reject those who eat meat from being Hindus. It recognizes meat-eating as part of certain human temperaments, such as

those of the warrior type, but recommends that they keep this practice within limits or make it into a sacrifice. Hindus in particular avoid eating of beef, to which many add avoiding eating any red meat.

A heavy meat diet can cause many diseases. Modern studies show that cancer, heart disease, arthritis and other ailments occur more frequently in heavy meat eaters, and that vegetarians have generally a better longevity. In addition, we must consider the special crisis of the planet today, in which meat consumption is one of the prime causes of pollution and the devastation of the natural environment. So even if we eat meat, we should keep it a small part of our diet.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT?

Many people today are looking for the dawning of a new age for humanity, perhaps ushered in by various cataclysms or natural disasters. Various cycles of civilization and different ages of humanity have come and gone through the great movement of time. Our current civilization is neither the first nor the last, nor the highest. Hinduism has witnessed the rise and fall of many great civilizations of the world since ancient Egypt and Sumeria. It has an awareness of previous world ages thousands of years before the present cycle of civilization that began at the end of the last Ice Age. Hindu thought both understands these cyclical changes and remains grounded in the eternal truth which transcends them.

More specifically, the New Age movement is a name for new thinking in spirituality, religion, and healing that has emerged in the western world over the past few decades. It includes a number of strands with eastern enlightenment traditions, western occult approaches and various new ideas in health, psychology, sociology and ecology. It has a prophetic trend and strongly futuristic vision. It contains a strong influence from Yoga, Buddhism, Vedanta and Hindu thought going back into the nineteenth century and before.

Sanatana Dharma generally finds an ally in the New Age movement because it also is looking for a planetary spirituality to reemerge. Hinduism encourages freedom of thought and exploration of both occult and spiritual realms such as is occurring in the New Age movement. Yet as an older tradition, Hinduism sees the dangers of wishful thinking and of getting trapped in the occult, which some New Age groups are caught in.

While we should endeavor to create a new age, it should be based upon the eternal, not upon transient desires or ungrounded speculations. We should not overlook the older proven Self-knowledge teachings of humanity and their practices and disciplines in an attempt to be modern and to find quick and easy ways of achieving our goals. A real new age for humanity should be based upon reclaiming our planetary heritage and our connection with the greater universe of consciousness, such as older wisdom traditions can lead us towards.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE HUMANITY BE LIKE?

We must first shift to a clean form of technology, relying on solar and other renewable resources, and discarding oil and other ëdirtyí forms of power that damage and pollute the Earth who is our Mother. We must gradually reintegrate our cities into nature by reducing their size and creating more parks and a greater open space between houses. We must restore the quality of our food, air and water by reducing our reliance on chemicals and fostering organic methods of agriculture. We must place larger regions of the planet into nature reserves where plants and animals can live without human interference or exploitation. We must reduce our consumption of meat and establish a more vegetarian diet.

We must return to natural forms of healing using herbs, diet, and body work such as found in Ayurveda. We must develop a new psychology that considers the yogic knowledge of the higher levels of the mind and the role of karma. We must recognize our connection with the universe through

occult sciences like astrology. We must gradually move in the direction of a global language, for which Sanskrit is probably the best prototype. We must create an educational approach that encourages creativity and deep inquiry, rather than the mere memorizing of information or gaining of mechanical skills.

We must move away from sectarian and exclusivist religions and return to universal ethical values of non-violence and human unity. We must develop internal approaches to the spiritual life through yogic practices and meditation, and cease to rely on external forms of churches, books, and rituals. We must learn to see the universe not as matter or energy but as consciousness. We must promote self-discipline, self-control and the building of character in order to create real leaders, giving up the culture of sensation, entertainment and instant gratification. We must restore the family system and community life, not as a rigid formation promoting narrow beliefs, but as an open and organic unfoldment of human and universal interconnectedness.

If we do not do these things voluntarily, then nature will bring us shocks through our wrong behavior to impel us in this direction. Unfortunately, future generations, after making these changes, will be inclined to look back upon our times as a dark age of dirty technology, genocide, and global exploitation, which have remained its dominant trends as we all can see if we but open our eyes.

DOES HINDUISM FORESEE A GLOBAL CATASTROPHE HAPPENING SOON?

Many groups, including Christian fundamentalists and New Age thinkers, are predicting massive and sudden global calamities like earthquakes, floods, new plagues, nuclear war, and so on. Some of these were thought to occur at the year 2000. Now many people are predicting the same for the year 2012. Some Hindus have similar ideas.

Even without unprecedented Earth changes, normal global fluctuations including earthquakes, floods and climate variations, which occur every few centuries anyway, may be strong enough to cause severe problems. Today there are more people residing all over the world, including in marginal regions like floodplains and deserts, as well as a precarious centralized economy making us collectively vulnerable to such disasters. And beyond these regular fluctuations, additional changes brought about by pollution and by our interference with our environment must have an effect. This means that certain shocks must occur globally for some time to come, though there will not likely be any sudden end of the world or single event that changes everything overnight.

Such a period of shock, however, will not bring about the magical destruction of our enemies or usher the fortunate survivors immediately into a new golden or spiritual age along with God, Jesus or the Messiah. It will not be finished in one overnight big event but last for a number of decades, with various larger and smaller catastrophes occurring in between. This period of shock will gradually force us to look at what we have been doing as a species, to realistically face our karma, and get to work cleaning up the mess we have created through our own ignorance, greed, and selfishness. It will take decades of hard work by all countries to counter the side effects from our wrong actions at a global level.

An attitude of determined selfless service for the planet as a whole is what we need today, not a belief in wild speculations and magical solutions that paralyze our ability to act and cause us to blame someone else for what is going on. Each one of us individually must take karmic responsibility for the world situation and be willing to spend the rest of our lives working to change it. With such an attitude we can indeed restore the world to a spiritual paradise, such as the ancient seers first saw it, and which is the real vision of humanity in Sanatana Dharma.

The future of humanity can be quite wonderful, if we all work together. All of our problems can and will be solved. There is no need for pessimism, but there is need for much concerted effort and,

above all, the seeking of Divine grace, not in the form of a new religion but in the form of a new understanding our true nature. The entire universe dwells within us and supports us, but only in regard to our true being, not in regard to our false desires!

Truth, knowledge, infinite Brahman ó He who knows That hidden in the supreme ether of the heart attains all desires.
Taittiriya Upanishad II.1

Bliss is the supreme reality. From bliss all beings are born, by bliss they live, into bliss they return.
Taittiriya Upanishad III.6

May Surrender is powerful. In surrender I take refuge. Surrender upholds Heaven and Earth. Surrender to the Gods, surrender is their ruler. Through surrender even great sins we have committed are removed.
Rig Veda VI.51.8

Questions 3 Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma

What does a modern Hindu say, particularly when questioned by those who may know little about their religious tradition, to explain what Hinduism really is? The following section has been devised to deal with these problems of expressing Hinduism in the modern age, which requires affirming its vast universality without losing its distinctive character.

A. What is Hinduism?

HOW DOES HINDUISM DEFINE ITSELF? Hinduism defines itself in terms of Sanatana Dharma, which means the ëuniversal traditioní. Such a comprehensive teaching is evident in the many-sided yogic and meditational practices of Hinduism, the vast culture of Hinduism including art, medicine and science, and in the Hindu recognition of the importance of all systems of knowledge, material, occult and spiritual. The social customs of Hinduism, with their emphasis on spiritual values, are also based upon such universal truth, though some of these have departed from it through the long course of time.

For this reason, it is important to redefine Hinduism in terms of Sanatana Dharma, to look at its universal perspective. Yet it is also important to redefine Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition in terms of Hinduism because Hinduism has maintained a living universal tradition through the millennia, which is of benefit to all who want to become part of such a tradition today. Above all, Hindus should define their tradition in their own practice, their own sadhana, as for Sanatana Dharma how we will is what matters, not merely our beliefs.

SHOULD THE TERM SANATANA DHARMA REPLACE HINDUISM?
The term Hinduism is subject to many misunderstandings, while Sanatana Dharma communicates the real meaning of the tradition. If Hindus use this term more frequently, they will have a greater understanding of the real tradition they follow and better allow those of other backgrounds to appreciate it. To gain recognition for the term Sanatana Dharma, we must first understand the meaning of Dharma as natural law and as oneís deeper nature, which is radically different than the idea of religion as a code of beliefs.

However, owing to familiarity and convenience of usage, we cannot simply dismiss the term Hinduism. We must define it differently, which is as Sanatana Dharma, not as the religion of a particular country. Hinduism should come to connote Sanatana Dharma. This requires looking at Hinduism with new eyes. No doubt in not long to come the term Hindu will no longer be necessary, and Sanatana Dharma can stand in its own right.

HOW HAVE THE GREAT TEACHERS OF HINDUISM RELATED TO RELIGION?

The many great sages of India ó the ancient Vedic seers from Manu to Krishna, the teachers of classical India like Shankara or Ramanuja, and modern yogis like Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi,

Sri Aurobindo or Anandamayi Ma to mention a few ó speak of themselves as part of a great universal tradition of truth relevant to all beings. They have not promoted themselves as Hindus opposed to some other group, nor have they failed to honor the Hindu tradition in its depth and diversity. They have not seen themselves as unique or entirely new in their knowledge, as but expressions of an eternal tradition and its stream of sages that we can call Hindu, Sanatana Dharma or whatever we wish, once we understand its timeless nature.

If we want to see what Hinduism is really like, we should look to the lives and teachings of the great sages, men and women, who have arisen from its background. In such extraordinary individuals, we see the essence of universal spirituality, fully developed in form and expression through a particular lineage and manifold teachings, but without limiting boundaries. These great gurus provide a model for the entire world to follow. And this model derives from the Hindu tradition itself. It is not something these individuals have produced apart from it.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN BRANCHES OF HINDU DHARMA?

Each Hindu deity is a symbol of the Supreme Deity and ultimately of oneís higher Self. Relating to Hindu deities reflects various practices of Yoga and meditation, not just outer rituals, prayers and beliefs. Hinduism traditionally is divided into five main branches:

1) *Vaishnava* or worshippers of Vishnu
2) *Shaiva* or worshippers of Shiva
3) *Shakta* or worshippers of the Goddess (Devi or Shakti)
4) *Ganapata* or worshippers of Ganapati (Ganesha)
5) *Saura* or worshippers of the Sun (Surya)

Sometimes worship of Lord Skanda (Kartikkeya or Muruga) is counted as another branch. Sometimes Buddha or Buddhism is added as the sixth line. Sometimes Jainism is also added as another line. Under the Surya branch is included all the astrological deities and sometimes the Vedic teaching in general, which is largely a worship of the Sun as the symbol of the supreme light of awareness. While the Shakta or Goddess tradition is a separate line, each branch also has its forms of the Goddess.

These five branches often coalesce into two, the Vaishnava and Shaiva. As Shakti is the consort of Shiva, her worship can be included with his, while her Lakshmi form can count under Vishnu. As Ganesha is the son of Shiva and Shakti, his worship usually goes along with his parents. As Surya, the Sun, is generally related to Vishnu, his worship usually goes along with that of Vishnu. That is why Hindus are commonly divided into Shaivites and Vaishnavas.

However, all such divisions are only convenient differentiations. Many other groups and subgroups exist, including recent and modern movements like Arya Samaj or the Swami Narayan movements.

HOW DO SHAIVAS AND VAISHNAVAS DIFFER? The Shaivas and Vaishnavas, the followers of Shiva and Vishnu, differ mainly in name and form, not fundamental teachings. They share the same principles, like karma and rebirth, and the same practices like puja (ritual), mantra and meditation. Shiva is considered to be the best devotee of Lord Vishnu and Vishnu is considered to be the best devotee of Lord Shiva.

Generally speaking, Vishnu represents the benign and approachable form of the Deity, who is worshipped more in the cities and plains of India; while Shiva portrays the transcendent and transformative form of the Divine worshipped more in the mountains and villages. Dualistic and non-dualistic forms of philosophy can be found among both groups, as well as every type of yogic practice. Both Shaivite and Vaishnava groups have vast literatures, special temples and holy places, and their own orders of monks and swamis.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN HINDU FORMS OF THE GODDESS?

Hinduism contains many feminine forms of the Divine like Kali, Durga, Sundari, Lakshmi and Sarasvati. These represent different feminine qualities and functions of the Divine which contains both male and female energies. For example, Kali portrays destructive and transformative energy, Lakshmi nourishing and sustaining powers, and Sarasvati creative and stimulating forces, while Durga is the Divine Mother in her protective role. Sundari is the form of the Goddess as representing beauty, bliss and transcendence. These are but a few of the many aspects of the Devi.

Hinduism also has many dual male-female forms like Radha-Krishna, Sita-Rama, Uma-Mahesh, and LakshmiNarayan in which the female form is usually addressed first. The different masculine forms of the Divine in Hinduism all have their feminine counterparts or consorts.

As Sanatana Dharma or a universal tradition, Hinduism recognizes that the Divine contains both masculine and feminine attributes. Without giving proper honor to the feminine, a religion must be incomplete and one-sided, which must result in its teachings having negative consequences. Without recognizing the feminine aspect of Divinity, one cannot claim to know God. Honoring the feminine is necessary to restore wholeness, completeness and universality.

WHAT ARE THE *VEDAS* AND THEIR IMPORTANCE? The *Vedas* are the largest and oldest literature that that remains from the ancient world. They are also the oldest books in any Indo-European language and the oldest scriptures of the Hindu tradition or Sanatana Dharma. There are four *Vedas* which are the foundation of Hindu thought:

1) *Rig Veda* or Veda of mantra
2) *Sama Veda* or Veda of chant or song
3) *Yajur Veda* or Veda of ritual
3) *Atharva Veda* or Veda of prayers and propitiations Yajur Veda followers are the largest Vedic group in India and are divided into two main subgroups, the Shukla or White Yajur Veda School which prevails in the north of India, and the Krishna or Black Yajur Veda School which prevails in the south.

Each of these four Vedic branches is in turn divided into four parts:

1. *Samhita* or mantra portion
2. *Brahmana* or prose ritualistic portion
3. *Aranyaka* or contemplative section
4. *Upanishad* or Self-knowledge portion

The *Samhita* is the main section and the oldest. *Brahmanas, Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* are closely connected as different levels of interpretation of the *Samhita*. Some *Upanishads* occur in *Aranyakas*, others in *Brahmanas*, yet many others by themselves.

The *Vedas* are composed in an ancient mantric language that requires a special insight in order to grasp. For this reason, the *Vedas* are usually approached through the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, which are composed in an easier to understand terminology.

The importance of the *Vedas* today is mainly for setting forth the main rituals and mantras of Hindu practice. Vedic rituals like Agnihotra and Vedic mantras like Gayatri are used by all Hindus to the present day. The *Upanishads* are most important for setting for the main philosophy and meditation approaches of Hinduism. Vedic mantras contain the seeds of these yogic higher practices, if one can penetrate through the veil of their symbols, as has been explained by such modern teachers as Dayananda Sarasvati, Sri Aurobindo, Ganapati Muni and Mahesh Yogi.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN VEDIC DEITIES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE?

Vedic deities reflect the forces of the cosmos and higher states of consciousness, which are also the main powers of light in the world of nature. The four main Vedic deities or prime aspects of the

Godhead (Brahman) are *Agni, Indra, Soma* and *Surya.*

Agni is not only fire as a cosmic force, but the power of speech and mantra, and the Divine light embodied in the material world, including the energy of our own soul. Indra is light as a cosmic force, particularly in the form of lightning or electrical energy. At an inner level, Indra is the power of Prana and the yogic practice of pranayama. Soma is the reflective aspect of light at a cosmic level, reflected in the Moon, water and magnetic energy. At an inner level, Soma is the mind and the power of meditation. Surya is the Sun or pure illumination as a cosmic force. At an inner level, Surya represents the Purusha, or light of awareness that pervades the universe. These are only general indications as the four deities overlap in various ways in terms of both form and function, as all represent various facets of the Divine light.

Relative to Yoga practice, Agni represents the Kundalini fire in the root or earth chakra that ascends to open the chakras and manifest all the higher powers of consciousness. Indra represents the power of perception in the third eye and meditative insight in general. Soma represents the bliss of meditation through the crown or head chakra, which descends as a nectar of bliss throughout our being. Surya represents the inner light of awareness in the spiritual heart, the presence of the Supreme Self behind all processes. Awakening and balancing these four forces is the essence of the Vedic Yoga.

WHAT ARE THE SIX VEDANGAS? There are six *Vedangas*, literally limbs of the Vedas.

1) *Kalpa* or ritual
2) *Siksha* or pronunciation
3) *Chandas* or meter
4) *Vyakarana* or grammar
5) *Nirukta* or etymology
6) *Jyotisha* or astrology and timing

The Vedangas allow us to properly pronounce, understand and employ the mantras of the *Vedas*, along with their associated rituals. Vedic astrology is the most important as it covers all aspects of time and karma.

WHAT ARE THE FOUR UPAVEDAS? These are *Ayurveda, Gandharva Veda, Sthapatya Veda* and *Dhanur Veda*. Ayurveda is the Vedic system of medicine for promoting overall well-being and for treating diseases of body and mind. Ayurvedic medicine is one of the main medical systems in India today and is spreading world wide both for its power of treating disease and its ability to promote wellness and longevity.

Gandharva Veda is Vedic music and dance and the traditions that have arisen out of the Vedas and is the basis of all Hindu music. Sthapatya Veda is Vedic architecture and directional sciences also called *Vastu*. It is still used for construction of houses, public buildings and temples in India, and being taken up for architectural purposes world wide. Vastu also teaches us the proper directions for meditation and how to access the healing power of various directional influences into our lives. Dhanur Veda, which means the Veda of the bow, refers to the Vedic martial arts. These include various forms of fighting with the hands or with weapons.

WHAT ARE THE SIX SYSTEMS OF VEDIC PHILOSOPHY OR VEDIC DARSHANAS?

There are six systems of ancient Vedic philosophy. These accept the authority of the *Vedas* and try to organize Vedic thought in a more systematic manner.

1) *Nyaya*
2) *Vaisheshika*
3) *Samkhya*

4) *Yoga*
5) *Purva Mimamsa*
6) *Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta*

Nyaya and Vaisheshika philosophies deal with logic, the means of knowledge and how to categorize our experience, which is the foundation of all clear thinking and systematic inquiry. Samkhya sets forth the main principles of cosmic existence up to the Purusha or Supreme Self. Yoga sets forth the practical means to realize the Purusha based upon Samkhya and the *Vedas*.

Purva Mimamsa reflects a ritualistic interpretation of Vedic texts designed to allow us to achieve better karmic results in this life and the next. It sets forth the science of ritual and Karma Yoga. Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta deals with the theology and philosophy of God and the Absolute and how to realize them. There are many different systems of Vedantic thought in India, including various Tantric systems. Most systems of Jnana and Bhakti Yoga, the Yogas of Knowledge and Devotion are of this type.

All six systems have many points in common and can be seen as different sides of Sanatana Dharma. They are all loosely speaking Vedantic as all accept the authority of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads*, the Vedantic portion of the *Vedas*. They all have some sort of Yoga or inner practice to go along with them.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF VEDIC SCIENCE? Vedic science is a complete sacred science combing the six Vedangas, the four Upavedas, the six Vedic Darshanas and related systems of thought, inquiry and practice. Its most important aspects are Yoga, Vedanta, the Science of Ritual, Ayurveda, Vedic astrology and Vastu. It rests upon the Vedic mantras but shows their broad relevance and utility on all these different levels of experience and practice.

Vedic science is not only the oldest science in the world; it is also the most futuristic. It shows us how to understand the power of consciousness behind the universe. It unlocks the mystic keys to the physiology of the body, the dynamics of the mind, the laws of physics and all the Divine powers at work in the world. For the future well being and development of higher consciousness in humanity, we need a new group of Vedic scientists in all these fields and from all over the world.

WHAT IS THE DATE OF THE *VEDAS*? The *Vedas* are said to represent eternal teachings and mantras about Sanatana Dharma. Therefore, in essence they have no date and are ever inherent in the cosmic mind. However, the current compilation of the *Vedas* that exists is said to have been completed around the time of the Mahabharata War by Veda Vyasa Krishna Dwaipayana, under the inspiration of Sri Krishna. It is said in the *Puranas* to be the twenty-eighth compilation of the *Vedas* in our current cycle of world-ages. Veda Vyasa based his compilation on much earlier material, mentioning kings and dynasties that ruled many generations before the time of Krishna. The traditional date of the Mahabharata War is 3102 BCE, which is an important date in many ancient cultures.

When the Greeks came to India at the time of Alexander, the Great, in the third century BCE, one of their historians, Megasthenes, records that the Hindus had a tradition of 153 kings going back over 6400 years. This reflects the antiquity of the Hindu culture going back long before even 3100 BCE. Vedic astronomical references, stellar positions of solstices and equinoxes also go back well before 2000 BCE, when stars like Aldeberan (Vedic star Rohini) in Taurus marked the vernal equinox.

DOESNíT THE ARYAN INVASION PROVE THAT THE *VEDAS* DATE FROM 1500 BCE? The Aryan Invasion theory is a nineteenth century European historical conjecture, reflecting a trend of the time to define cultures mainly in terms of language families and their proposed migrations. In recent decades, the Aryan Invasion theory has been discredited because no archaeological evidence or any other type of hard data for it has ever been found. Such evidence has been proposed but has not

stood the test of time.
The archaeological record, on the contrary, shows an organic and indigenous development of culture and civilization in the Indian subcontinent going back to at least 7000 BCE (the Mehrgarh site for example), with little input from outside regions and no records of significant movements of people into India or destroyed cities in India from such Aryan invaders. No one has ever been able to locate any intrusive Aryans in this archaeological record at all.
This decline of the Aryan Invasion theory has led to two main camps. The first camp holds that instead of an invasion there was a small migration that brought in the language and culture of the *Vedas* into India after 1500 BCE. This they hold on linguistic grounds only as so far they have not produced any non-linguistic evidence for it.
The second camp holds that there was no invasion or migration but that the Vedic people were indigenous to India, as one of the main inhabitants of the region. For this they point out several reasons. The Vedic culture emphasizes the Sarasvati River, flowing between the Yamuna and the Shutudri (Sutlej). Such a great river existed in ancient India and was the main site of human habitation and urban development up to its drying up that occurred shortly after 2000 BCE according to current geological studies. They also point out that the lack of archaeological evidence discredits the theory altogether. The proposed Aryans could not have changed the languages of the subcontinent without leaving any trace in the archaeological record. So far there are no ruins, artifacts, encampments, skeletons, destroyed cities or anything else that has been identified as belonging to the incoming Aryans. Unless we have solid evidence for the socalled Aryans coming from the outside, we cannot uphold it on linguistic speculation only. The Indo-European languages could just as well have diffused from India, as it had a large urban culture to promote it.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE *MAHABHARATA*? The *Mahabharata* is perhaps the longest book in the world with one hundred thousand verses. It is often called the fifth Veda. It presents Vedic teachings in stories and in a more common language. The most important part of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita* of Sri Krishna. But the *Mahabharata* contains many other deeper spiritual teachings as in the *Moksha Dharma Parva* and *Anu Gita*. The philosophy of the *Mahabharata* synthesizes and expands that of the *Upanishads*. It goes into great detail into the practice of Yoga and related teachings.

The Hindu religion as it appears today is still largely the religion portrayed in the *Mahabharata*, in which all the main deities of Hinduism like Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, Ganesha and Skanda are well explained, including avatars like Rama and Krishna. The *Mahabharata* also presents a synthesis of Hindu philosophies including Samkhya, Yoga, Vedanta, Vaishnavism and Shaivism. It contains many other important sections like the Thousand Names of Vishnu and the Thousand Names of Shiva. All those who want to understand Hindu Dharma should study the *Mahabharata*.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE *RAMAYANA*? The *Ramayana* is the oldest of Hinduismís great epics and most ancient poetic (kavya) work. Its story centers on the figure of Lord Rama, regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu, and an ideal person and king. The *Ramayana* contains many notable figures like Sita, Ramaís wife, Hanuman, the monkey warrior, and Lakshman, the brother of Raman. The *Ramayana* sets forth the principles of dharmic action in human life.

The *Ramayana* is probably the greatest epic of all Asia. It is found not only in India but in Thailand, Indochina and Indonesia, among Buddhist as well as Hindu groups. There are several versions of this great text of which the most ancient is the Sanskrit of Valmiki and the most popular recent version is the Hindi of Tulsidas from the sixteenth century. Ramayana scenes figure strongly in India and South Asian art. The name of Rama is also one of the most important of all mantras.

WHAT ARE THE *PURANAS* AND THEIR IMPORTANCE?

The *Puranas* are ancient and medieval Hindu texts that contain a broad range of encyclopedic teachings about all aspects of life including religion, science, medicine, history, geography, social customs, Yoga, mantra, worship and meditation. There are many different recensions of the *Puranas*, which gradually added new material over a very long period of time. They were said to have begun at the time of the Mahabharata War but continued to develop as a branch of literature of their own.

The *Puranas* are generally related to primary Hindu deities like Shiva, Vishnu and the Goddess, but usually mention all the other main deities within them. There are eighteen major *Puranas* but several minor *Puranas* as well. *Puranas* usually are based on and expand somewhat the themes and teachings of the *Mahabharata*. Most notable are the *Vishnu Purana, Vayu Purana, Agni Purana, Garuda Purana, Srimad Bhagavatam* and *Devi Purana*. The Puranas are one of the most important branches of Hindu thought and perhaps the most neglected. They are worthy of profound study and research.

DONíT HINDU TEXTS LIKE THE *MANU SAMHITA* DEGRADE THE ROLE OF WOMEN?

Hindu thought contains many types of texts on various subjects, not all scriptural in nature. *Manu Samhita* is one of many *Dharma Sutra* texts, special texts that were the basis of Hindu social law in past centuries. As a particular text, *Manu Samhita* is around two thousand years old and is mainly concerned with the social situation of that time period. Within the Dharma Sutra literature a variety of opinions are given on various topics.

The law code of Manu in the *Manu Samhita* contains a great regard for Yoga, meditation and asceticism. However, we cannot compare it to social law codes today in respects of social liberalism. It does overall subordinate women and regard them as necessary of protection.

Manu Samhita is not a scriptural text that all Hindus must follow, but just one of many ancient law codes, which itself has undergone considerable changes over time. Compared to law codes of its time, like the *Book of Leviticus* in the Bible, which many Christians accept as the Word of God, the law code of Manu is very liberal and spiritual. It is more progressive overall than the Islamic Sharia that is still the basis of Islamic law in the great majority of Islamic countries in the world today.

We must remember that even in the United States, slavery was legal until 1863, as it was in many Christian countries. If we are going to judge Hinduism today by its ancient law codes, then we ought to do the same for other religions and cultures. Hindus today have created new social customs in line with changing times, as have different Hindu groups and thinkers. In Hindu thought, the spiritual path of Selfrealization is eternal, but social customs must change with time.

WHAT IS TANTRA?

Tantra is a set of Hindu teachings generally giving various rituals and techniques to achieve the various goals of life, including liberation. Buddhist and Jain Tantras of a similar nature also exist.

The highest Tantras are spiritual texts providing worship of deities, mantras, and meditation to achieve union with God and Self-realization. They are great yogic teachings and imbued with the higher truths of Vedanta. Tantras of an intermediate level use rituals and mantras to gain personal goals like health, prosperity, marital happiness or children. Inferior Tantras use similar methods to gain control over the minds of other people or even inflict harm. Inferior Tantras are a kind of black magic that no spiritual person can really approve of.

In the western world today, Tantra is mainly known through various sexual Tantric practices. In fact, to most westerners Tantra means sex. Such sexual Tantras were usually part of the intermediate or inferior Tantras, but not the higher Tantras. They make up a small portion of Tantric teachings and should not be made to represent Tantra as a whole.

As the Goddess represents the Divine Word and the force of nature, most Tantric approaches are based on worshipping her. She controls all energies and gives mastery over all techniques. The Goddess is the power of Yoga, the Yoga Shakti that leads us to our true Self. True Tantra shows us how to worship the Goddess and realize her power within ourselves.

WHY ARE HINDU DEITIES PORTRAYED IN WRATHFUL FORMS?

Hindu Gods and Goddesses often have fierce forms, including wearing garlands of skulls, being adorned with snakes, and other frightening appearances. Even deities that are benefic may carry various powerful weapons. This may disturb people, particularly those who do not understand symbolic language.

The Divine transcends our ordinary sensory perception of the world. It dwarfs our mind and ego. It includes death and goes beyond it. It consumes everything. Experiencing this infinite reality is very humbling, even frightening to we are trapped in the world of limitation, as it takes away our ordinary identity and may make the world appear to be unreal. Spiritual realization is like death because it is the dissolution of our ego, or sense of separate self. Such apparently terrible Deities show these experiences of transcendence, in which even evil, death and suffering must be integrated into a truth beyond all duality.

There is another way in which the Divine is frightening. It destroys all the forces of ignorance, illusion and negativity. It destroys all the demons that dwell in our minds. As such a destroyer of negativity it may appear fierce or as a warrior, but it is only something that those trapped in negativity need fear.

It is easy to see God in the beautiful and beneficent, but to enter into the Oneness we must also see God in the terrible and transformative. Without recognizing the Divine even in death we cannot go beyond death. Because of this Hindu and Buddhist traditions have always recognized the importance of wrathful Deities. They have never encouraged that we become wrathful and harm other people in the name of our God.

WHY ARE HINDU DEITIES PORTRAYED IN EROTIC FORMS?

Hindu deities and temple sculpture often appears erotic or voluptuous, so that western missionaries thought these images were only a glorification of sexuality even though they were part of a tradition that has always valued asceticism.

God is the ultimate bliss and delight. Union with the Divine is the supreme love, in which the male and female sides of our nature, the masculine and feminine aspects of consciousness must unite. To show this Hindu artists have traditionally employed graphic images. Such images are symbolic like Radha and Krishna, who represent the soul and its love of God. To the Hindu mind, our passions should be directed to the Divine. For this reason, it has not hesitated to portray them as part of a spiritual symbolism. But to confuse these with a glorification of sexuality is to completely misinterpret them.

ISNíT THE SHIVA LINGA A PHALLIC SYMBOL? The Shiva Linga is the symbol of Shiva or the cosmic masculine force. Forms of Shiva Lingas include the Sun and Moon, mountains, fire, certain trees, conical rocks and crystals, and also the sexual organs of male creatures. All these demonstrate an ascending energy in nature.

However, it is wrong to think that the Shiva Linga is limited to the male sexual organ or is a symbol of sexuality. It is a symbol of cosmic power, stability, eternity and transcendence. Unfortunately, the western mind has a sexual obsession and cannot see beyond the sexual aspects of any symbolism. The love between Radha and Krishna is also a symbol of Divine love, but many

western scholars would similarly like to reduce it to human passion only. The Hindu mind has a cosmic connection and draws out the cosmic meaning of symbols. That is why for it all of nature is a book of Divine wisdom, forces and powers.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF PHILOSOPHY?

India has been the land of probably the greatest development of spiritual philosophy in the world, which is an essential part of the Yoga of knowledge. Hinduism has produced some of the worldís most important philosophies, particularly the various schools of Vedanta. Yet its view of philosophy can be very different than that of the West. The correct Hindu word for philosophy is darshana, which means ëa way of perceptioní. Each of the philosophies of Hinduism is a spiritual approach which requires following a certain lifestyle, ethic disciplines and practicing various yogic methods to arrive at this perception. Hindu philosophies are meant to help us realize the truth beyond the world of the senses. They all have a view which transcends the ordinary mind-body complex.

According to a Vedantic view, there is little real philosophy in the western world. Western philosophical thinking has largely gone down hill since the time of Plato, abandoning spiritual experience and a transcendent view of life for rational, speculative, and utilitarian considerations. It has fallen increasingly under the domination of the senses, and is now often an apologetic for a scientific-materialistic view that is unaware of higher dimensions of consciousness. Even western religious philosophy, as in the case of Christian and Islamic theology, has little of the experiential spirituality and exploration of higher states of consciousness and samadhi found in Hindu and Buddhist systems.

Philosophy in India, moreover, continues to be a living and experiential endeavor. Modern India has not only maintained its ancient philosophical traditions but has produced new philosophers like Sri Aurobindo, who were also great yogis, and have brought in many new important insights for the future of humanity.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF VEDANTA?

The different schools of Vedanta vary around whether they consider the Divine Reality (Brahman) to be a pure unity, or whether there is some degree of duality between the soul and the Divine. All are spiritual philosophies emphasizing the Divine as the supreme reality. Advaita Vedanta or nondualistic Vedanta, whose most important traditional teacher is Shankaracharya, teaches that the soul and God are absolutely one. Visishtadvaita, or qualified non-duality, based on the works of Ramanuja, teaches that the soul and God are both the same and different. Dvaita, or dualistic Vedanta of Madhva, teaches that God and the soul though deeply related are different, like lover and beloved. Lord Chaitanyaís school of Acintyabhedabheda accepts both difference and nondifference and says Truth is indescribable. There are several other schools as well.

All these systems accept the law of karma, the importance of surrender to God, ethical disciplines like non-violence, and the practice of various yogic and meditational methods. Even dualistic Vedanta is not dualistic in the sense of western religions, which in the case of Christianity may require the resurrection of the physical body and the soul living in that body in Heaven worshipping God in the distance. Dualistic Vedanta conceives the difference between God and the soul to be very subtle at a level of deep awareness. All systems of Vedanta see the true relationship between God and the soul to occur only in samadhi or a state of deep spiritual absorption that goes far beyond the ordinary mind and senses, in which the physical body is all but forgotten. They all regard that we can experience God much more vividly than anything else we have ever known.

WHAT IS THE BEST SINGLE BOOK TO STUDY TO LEARN ABOUT HINDUISM?

While Hinduism has many great books and scriptures, probably the most accessible and

comprehensive of these is the *Bhagavad Gita* of Sri Krishna. The *Gita* is not only honored by followers of Krishna and Vishnu, but is sacred to all Hindus. It clearly sets forth the prime Hindu and Vedantic teachings of karma, rebirth, liberation and the immortality of the soul in the higher Self.

The *Gita* is also probably the most important text on Yoga. Krishna is said to be the yogavatara, the avatar or Divine incarnation of Yoga. It explains in detail the Yoga paths of knowledge, devotion and service and many other yogic terms only addressed briefly in the *Yoga Sutras*. One should start the study of Hindu philosophy and Yoga with the *Bhagavad Gita*.

WHAT IS THE BASIS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM? Caste is the most embarrassing part of Hinduism and the most difficult to explain to the modern mind. It appears as a religiously reinforced form of social oppression. Yet if we look deeply into the matter we see that caste is not something unique to Hindus, nor is caste as it exists in India today truly reflective of the great teachings of Hinduism as to how society should be structured.

Caste arose as part of the ancient world order, a division of society into priests (ritualists), nobility (warriors), merchants (and farmers), and servants, such as occurred throughout the ancient world and up into recent centuries existed even in Europe. It originally reflected an organic idea of society as one body with different limbs or functions, with different individuals fulfilling different social roles for the benefit of all. Over time this division of labor became determined by birth alone, though originally it was determined by the natural inclinations of the person.

Such caste by birth has persisted more in India and other parts of Asia because of conservative social attitudes. Yet it is no more essential to Hinduism today than it has been to other religions, including Christianity, that were once represented by the same types of social systems. Many modern Hindu religious leaders have spoken against its limitations and many older teachers did so as well. Traditional Hindu texts like the *Vedas* portray a much more open society than what the caste system has become. And many modern Hindu sects like Arya Samaj do not have caste at all. So it is wrong to think that caste, particularly by birth, represents the original Hindu social order or is required for all Hindus.

Behind the caste system was originally a great idea that became distorted. The Hindu social system (varnashrama dharma), which degenerated into caste, gave people who developed their minds preeminence in society over the warrior and merchant classes. Unfortunately, people became judged by their family of birth rather than by the real qualities of their character, which turned this great idea into a misleading appearance.

Sanatana Dharma is an eternal way of spiritual knowledge that may be associated with any number of social systems. Yet it does state the society should found itself on spiritual values to really serve the soul of man. Hinduism teaches that there is an organic structure to society, that certain types of people exist to fulfill the different functions of the social being, like his arms, feet or brain. Through this organic structure, it regards all humanity, in fact the entire universe as one great Being. Each one of us is not only part of that being, each one of us is that universal Being in its totality. This is the real meaning of our social interconnectedness.

In the modern world, it is the merchant (commercial) class that rules the world, including dictating religion. The warrior class (those with the most guns or best weapons) also has much power. Spiritual people, the true Brahmins, generally have neither money, nor power, nor respect. In this regard, we should not think that our modern social order is the best but should look to a spiritual ordering of society that emphasizes the pursuit of higher consciousness as the real goal of life.

Hindus should work hard to eradicate oppressive caste divisions within Hindu society. This is a stain on the real spirit and teaching of Sanatana Dharma, which inhibits its many beneficial teachings

from spreading worldwide. Yet at the same time, Hindus should work to maintain a social order based upon spiritual values, in which Yoga and meditation are emphasized. Hindus need not give up their strong family and community connections, which serve to protect and support the individual, but must remember the greater Vedic teaching that the entire world is one family (vasudhaiva kutumakam).

WHO IS A TRUE BRAHMIN?

A true Brahmin is a person of spiritual knowledge grounded in cosmic intelligence, who understands the universal order and works to further it in the world. To become a true Brahmin means to remain in a state of learning, ever seeking to open up to the Divine Reality. It requires a life of seeking truth and upholding firm ethical and spiritual principles like nonviolence, non-attachment, humility and truthfulness. Such a true Brahmin cannot be created by mere birth alone but requires daily spiritual practice or sadhana.

Such aware individuals become the teachers of society and should be respected, not for their position, but for their degree of connection with cosmic reality that they bring to all. All cultures have their learned people whom they revere, what could be called their Brahmins. These should be people of Self-realization for society to truly flourish. We should train at least a portion of society from birth to pursue the spiritual life. Otherwise our societyís spiritual potential cannot truly flower. This is the basis of a real Brahmin class but it is a condition gained by merit and behavior. The individuals who belong to it must live the appropriate life-style, which requires humility and regard for the welfare of all creatures.

B. Hinduism and Other Religions

WHAT IS HINDU RELIGIOUS PLURALISM?

Hindus believe that there are many spiritual and religious paths both inside the main religions of the world and outside of them. The Hindu religious view is one of pluralism. It recognizes a unity of truth but many ways to approach it, some direct, some indirect.

Contrary to the Hindu view are religious traditions that believe that they alone have the truth or that the only real relationship with the Divine must be through them. We can call these ëexclusive religious traditionsí. They are generally exclusive in their actions as well and try to convert the entire world to their beliefs even to the detriment of other religious and spiritual traditions.

It is not enough today for religions to come together on a political front and affirm world peace and the unity of humanity. As long as religions are dividing humanity into hostile camps of the believers and the non-believers ñ those favored by God and those condemned by God ñ they are still promoting violence and vision. It is important that religions come on a religious front, and affirm that no religious group owns the truth but, rather, that there are many paths to the Divine. We need a global declaration of religious pluralism in order to really promote world peace. Otherwise our talk of peace cannot be taken seriously.

We need not agree on which path is best for us or even which path might be best overall. But we should affirm pluralism in religion just as we affirm pluralism in politics and other spheres of life. Just as politically in democracy, we affirm the rights of others to vote differently than we do, so too in religion we should affirm the rights of others to follow other religions than our own. The Hindu approach of Sanatana Dharma, taking a universal view, can be a good aid to this move from religious exclusivism to religious pluralism, which is as important a move for society as its rejection of racism in the last century.

WHAT IS HINDU THEISM?

As a universal tradition, Hinduism includes a recognition of the One Creator of the universe.

However, it does not regard theism as the only approach to the spiritual life, nor does it have only one formulation of theism that everyone must follow. Hindu theism contains many names and forms like those of Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva, who stand for the Divine in its roles of creating, preserving and destroying the universe. It may emphasize the Divine as female rather than male in attributes, like Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Durga.

Hindu theism is an experiential system, not a code of belief. It says that it is not enough to believe in God; we must come to experience the Divine within us through yogic practices. It emphasizes our inner relationship to God, not a mere outer formal identity.

Hindu theism includes monism or the idea that there is only One Reality. It recognizes that God as a personal reality rests upon the Divine as the principle of existence or the Absolute. Like other systems of dharmic thought, Hindu theism recognizes karma and rebirth, and the practice of Yoga as the way to experience the Divine. According to Hindu theism, God has created us not to reward or punish us, but to know Him/Her and to become part of His/Her eternal and infinite delight, which is the ultimate destiny of all souls.

Western religions are theologically weak. They rest on antiquated ideas of only one life for the soul. They turn God into almost a tyrant, meting eternal rewards and punishments for the deeds or beliefs of a single life. Only if theism is tied to the acceptance of karma and rebirth ñ that God creates souls with a free will to work their own way back to him through repeated births ñ is it a truly rational and spiritual system. For this, western theism should look to Hindu theism.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF THEOLOGY? Theology should set forth, both rationally and with proper consideration if the role of faith, an understanding of God, the principles of cosmic creation and the way for the soul to return to its unity with God. Theology should link us up with the Divine Father/Mother of the universe through all of its forms and functions on the various levels of this manifold universe both inwardly and outwardly. Theology should not be a system of dogmas to follow outwardly, or ideas to limit our thoughts to but should direct us inwardly to realization of the Divine within us.

Most western theology is of a dualistic nature. It stops short with an intellectual explanation of God or with setting up of principles of faith, which are not to be questioned however arbitrary they might appear. It often appears more as an apologetic for religion rather than a deep inquiry into universal Truth. It mainly follows Aristotle, who was more of an intellectual than a spiritual person. Western theology does not recognize the ultimate reality of the Self or Atman, which it does not mention, and rejects important cosmic laws like that of karma. Western theology has much to learn from Hindu theology. Hindus should seek to dialogue with western theology to help raise the level of theological thinking in the world. In this way, theology can be used to direct us to the spiritual path, not merely to uphold the dogma of one religion or another.

DO HINDUS HAVE PROPHETS AND MESSIAHS? Hinduism does not look to prophets or messiahs who have a special relationship with God that other people cannot have and whom we must use as intermediaries, which is the usual view of Christianity and Islam. Hinduism looks to great gurus and spiritual guides who set forth paths to Self-realization to be adapted on an individual basis. From the Hindu view, which has seen the coming and going of many religious systems, great teachers and Divine incarnations manifest periodically in order to guide human beings relative to changing circumstances. There is no beginning or end to such great teachers, though we may prefer to follow one or another.

Hindu history records hundreds of such sages from ancient to modern times and says that we should honor all of them, not restricting ourselves to one only, as if knowledge of God, which is

infinite, was the property of one person or line of people. More important than any prophet or savior is a true guru who can teach us how to contact the truth within our own nature. Self-realization is what liberates us from ignorance and karma, not any prophet, and for this even the guru is only an aid.

WHAT ARE AVATARS?

Sanatana Dharma recognizes a perennial stream of great teachers and sages, some whose spiritual qualities are so pure that they could be called veritable incarnations of the Divine. These special incarnations can be called avatars, literally ëDivine descentsí, though the term may be used loosely today for various great teachers or spiritual masters.

In the traditional Hindu sense, avatars appear to uphold and renovate Sanatana Dharma or the eternal teaching. They represent the manifestation of Lord Vishnu, the Divine power that preserves and protects the universe. In this regard there are usually ten avatars of Vishnu, but sometimes as many as twenty six. Such great avatars of Vishnu were Rama and Krishna and, by some accounts, the Buddha.

The lives of avatars, which often contain various miraculous and legendary elements, are grand symbols of the spiritual search and go far beyond anything merely human. They become models for others to study and emulate. The worship of avatars is an important part of Hindu devotional practices and the subject of many teachings.

ARE CHRIST AND MOHAMMED AVATARS? Some Hindu groups have used the term avatar in a broad sense for anyone who has founded a major world religion, in which case Christ and Mohammed could be called avatars. However, this is not the original meaning of the term which has nothing to do with organized religion but is part of a yogic symbolism. Christ and Mohammed are not part of the traditional Hindu scheme of the ten avatars of Vishnu nor, we might add, are all the great saints and sages of Hinduism. The avatar order reflects a certain teaching, which is one line of approach and is not meant to be inclusive of all the great teachers of humanity. These ten are Matsya (Fish), Kurma (Tortoise), Varaha (Boar), Vamana (Dwarf), Narasimha (Manlion), Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki.

One can look to the Divine as manifesting through any number of great human beings. Such a great person becomes an avatar of sorts for those who worship him. Today the term avatar is often used rather loosely for various teachers. Yet it is important that we truly honor the Divine in great gurus, not merely their human form. Avatars should be part of a teaching that directs us to the inner quest, not to glorifying an outer religious institution.

According to orthodox Islam, Mohammed is not an avatar but a prophet of God, a messenger, not an incarnation. According to orthodox Christianity, Christ was not an avatar or incarnation of God but the only Son of God. While Hindus can redefine these teachers in light of their own religion, they should recognize that the great majority members of these religions would find that to be a misrepresentation their faith as they practice it.

WAS JESUS CHRIST A YOGI?

Some great gurus from India have taught that Christ was a yogi, connected to the teachings of Sri Krishna, and died in India. They point out Yoga based teachings in the sayings attributed to Jesus, as well as the non-violent approach followed by him. They claim that Church later obscured and then eradicated the yogic roots of original Christianity.

Other writers have points out Yoga and Vedanta influences the Greco-Roman world from the time of Alexander, if not before, to the fall of the Roman Empire. They note an extensive trade and communication network between India and the Mediterranean going back many centuries. They suggest a yogic influence not simply on early Christianity but upon Essene Judaism, Gnosticism,

Greek philosophy and other pagan movements, including teachers like Plotinus and Apollonius.

Other Hindu thinkers consider that some yogic and mystical elements got mixed in with early Christianity from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture but were not original to it. Yet other Hindu thinkers find that the *New Testament* contains the seeds of intolerance and exclusivism not appropriate to the Yoga tradition.

Overall, there is no single Hindu view on Jesus. However, no great gurus from India accept the idea of Jesus as the only Son of God or heaven and hell as the ultimate goal of life. In short, Hindu gurus may accept a yogic influence on Jesus, or a mystical basis to his teaching, but they do not accept the predominant theologies or beliefs of mainstream Christianity.

ARE SUFIS YOGIS?

There are Indian Sufis that follow Yoga like practices like mantra and meditation aimed at Self-realization, but these are small minority and generally regarded as unorthodox. Most Sufis regard themselves as staunch or orthodox Muslims and find little of value in the Hindu tradition. While Yoga and Sufism have similar philosophies and speak of spiritual realization, only a few Sufis accept karma and rebirth, and as practicing Muslims they will not use images in their forms of worship.

DO ANGELS EXIST?

There are many different worlds, levels and layers of the universe beyond the physical, each with its corresponding types of creatures or entities. Such beings more subtle than humans could be called angels. Hindus call them Gods or Devas, though again there are many different levels of such entities, with the highest Gods being powers of the supreme knowledge. There are also various classes of sages and seers who exist on different levels of consciousness and their particular worlds and are angelic, celestial or divine in their function.

Angelic beings may serve to guide or help human beings and aid in their evolution. Yet these beings may not themselves be enlightened, though their consciousness may be beyond what is ordinarily human. They may have powers of creativity or perception like the ability to see the future, which they can relay to human beings to various degrees. However, contact with them is no substitute for meditation or for human gurus.

Divine forces assume various appearances relative to the condition of the human mind. Coming into contact with an influx of spiritual energy, the human mind may imagine that it is contacting an angel or some higher entity. All such Gods, angels and devils dwell within us as various formations of the power of consciousness. We should understand the nature of consciousness, which is the supreme reality, beyond all external appearances.

DO HINDUS BELIEVE IN REVELATION? Hinduism is a timeless religion, a formulation of Sanatana Dharma, the eternal way. Sanatana Dharma is not based upon any particular historical revelation ñ the message given to a particular person at a particular time and place, nor is it looking toward some end of the world. It recognizes the eternity of creation and the immortality of the soul. Its revelation is that of the eternal in the here and now, in each individual, which is a matter of direct perception, a message received from another.

According to Sanatana Dharma the revelation that we all need is Self-revelation, not that of an external deity. Selfrevelation is enlightenment or Self-illumination that arises when the mind is silent. This revelation transcends all words and all religious authorities and takes us beyond time. Great sages may bring important messages to humanity at different times but these are not the ultimate revelation that only comes through our own practice. Though we should honor the messages of the sages, we should use these to understand the eternal, not to trap ourselves in any temporal event, which must be limiting.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF SCRIPTURES? Scripture in the western religious sense means the Word of God as revealed in a particular book like the *Bible* or *Koran*. Scripture can also stand for an inspired book or source teaching that a particular religion honors as very important. The primary books of various religions, like the *Bhagavad Gita* of Hinduism or the *Tao Teh Ching* of Taoism, may be called scriptures even though they may not literally be regarded by their followers as the Word of God. In this vast universe, any number of scriptures and inspired spiritual books are possible. Hindus have many sacred texts like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Agamas* and *Puranas*.

However, the supreme scripture, the real Word of God, can never be put in human language, which is inherently limited by time, place and culture. The Divine Word is a state of consciousness, best revealed in silence of mind. It is not a mere book that can be pulled off a shelf and quoted. It is best represented by mantra, particularly the mantra OM, which is the essence of the *Vedas.*

Different spiritual and religious teachings develop relative to the needs and temperaments of people according to time, place, and culture. This is the same as differences in food and clothing, which reflect universal human needs for food and shelter. Some so-called scriptures have much spiritual truth in them, others have very little. We cannot simply equate all books that are called scriptures and make them true, though each may have some value. The idea that only one scripture is true is like saying that only one type of food is good. The idea that all scriptures are true is like saying that all food is equally good. The highest truth is to contact the Divine Word and presence within our own hearts. This takes is beyond the need for external scriptures, revealed to us the essence that all higher teachings refer to.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF SIN? Hinduism does not believe that human beings suffer from any original sin or inherent fault in their nature that must be corrected by an external influence or special grace. On the contrary, Sanatana Dharma teaches that our original nature is pure goodness, Being-Consciousness-Bliss, and that we are all inherently one with the Divine.

The Hindu concept of sin is one of uncleanliness, the accumulation of something extraneous that must be removed for us to return to our inherent purity. For example, the body naturally gets dirty and one has to clean it. Such dirt is not a sin, though it is unhealthy not to keep oneself clean. There are similar emotional and mental impurities. In our natural activity we may pick up wrong impressions, attitudes, and experiences. We should cleanse our minds regularly of these through ritual, mantra and meditation. Such mental impurities, if allowed to accumulate, can cause emotional imbalances and lead to wrong actions that may result in harm.

The Hindu view of sin is free of the ideas of guilt, fear and punishment. From its point of view the greatest sin is to call a person a sinner. There is not and never will be such an entity as a sinner. The same Divine Self exists in all beings who, through ignorance alone, commit various wrong actions. To call a person a sinner is to deny their Divine essence and make them identify themselves with the sin, which reinforces its hold on them. Whatever we think; that we become. If we think that we are fallen, wretched, and mere sinners; that we become. If we think that we are God, we become God. We should not debase ourselves with thoughts that are not great. There are no sinners, though there are wrong actions. We should not condemn a person as a sinner but should try to understand the nature of right action. Right action is acting with respect for the sacred nature of all beings.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF SALVATION? Hinduism does not teach that we are sinners in need of salvation but that we are the Divine itself needing to awaken to its true nature. We are suffering from ignorance and the cure for this is knowledge. We have forgotten our true Self, which is eternal, and are caught in the outer world, which is transient. The Hindu concept is one of liberation, which is very different than the idea of salvation and should not be equated with it. Liberation is not

from sin but from ignorance, which is the misconception that we are other than the Divine. Even those who perform good deeds according to the prescriptions of a particular religion and are said to be saved are bound by ignorance and not liberated if they do not know their true Self.

Hinduism does not look to salvation or to a savior as anything ultimate. It looks to mergence in the Divine who is the being of all. The only way to reach this is through right meditation which clears the mind of the impressions (samskaras) that bind it to the external world. Liberation takes us beyond the cycle of rebirth, while salvation is just an emotional or mental state, which may bring some temporary peace or happiness, but no final release. Even those who are saved must be born again until they have worked out their karmas and come to understand their true nature.

IS THERE A FINAL JUDGMENT IN HINDUISM? Hinduism is not a religion of judgment but of acceptance.

It is not based upon the condemnation of anyone but upon the recognition of the sole reality of the Divine. There is no final, absolute or irrevocable judgment about anything. As all actions are limited and relative, being bound to the realm of time and space, their results must have an end. Can there be a final judgment about the sun, the wind or the rain? So too, human beings, who are replicas of the entire universe, can never be judged in any conclusive manner. In essence we are consciousness, which is one with God as the true Self. We can never be removed from it. However long we may appear to stay away from it, we must eventually return to it as our real home.

Actions have specific results which we must experience as long as we are bound to the realm of desire. However action itself does not bind the soul but only the concept ìI-am-thedoer.î The ego or doer-sense causes us to identify personally with what we do, to seek gain externally and leads us to do wrong, self-aggrandizing actions.

In reality there is no doer because consciousness transcends all material forms. If there is no doer, who is there to be judged? The soul is inherently free of action and its results. Once we realize this we go beyond cause and effect. But as long as we are attached to action, we cannot experience this freedom and must be accountable for what we have done.

God does not judge anyone, nor does a wise person judge others. The other person is God, who are we to judge God? Our actions speak for themselves and bring about their specific results. God does not punish a person for harming another. The very action of harm has its effect on the person who projects it. The only final judgment for all creatures is: ìYou are the Self of all. Live according to your nature and be happy.î

IS THERE HINDU FUNDAMENTALISM?

Fundamentalism in religion generally consists of literally believing in a single religion, prophet or savior, a particular scripture as literally the word of God and the insistence that all human beings accept it. Fundamentalism does not exist in Hinduism as it does in belief-oriented religions because Hinduism does not insist upon One God, one savior, or one Bible for humanity, nor does it claim that its religion alone has the final or highest truth. There is no exclusivism in Hinduism that can sustain such religious fundamentalism. No true Hindu would say that only the Hindu scripture is true and those of other religions are false. No true Hindu would say that only Hindus can find God and non-Hindus must go to hell.

There are traditional Hindus who want to preserve Hindu values and a Hindu way of life, which is a culture of devotion and meditation. Such traditional Hindu values do not require the assertion of an exclusive or militant fundamentalism. There are also conservative and socially backward Hindus who may be trying to preserve regressive Hindu social customs like untouchability, which are unjust. This is the closest thing to Hindu fundamentalism but, however wrong it may be, to associate it with a

monolithic religious fundamentalism seeking to convert the world is misleading. It is a social evil not a uniform fundamentalist belief system. Such socially regressive Hinduism is best countered by teaching real Sanatana Dharma, which honors the unique contribution of each person to the cosmic order.

IS THERE MILITANCY IN HINDUISM? Militancy has not existed in Hinduism to the extent that it has in belief-oriented religions. This is owing to the tolerant spirit of Hinduism and its emphasis on non-violence. Hindus have never invaded any country and tried to convert its people through force, propaganda, or economic pressure, the way Christian and Islamic countries have done through history. There is no Hindu history of holy wars, crusades, or foreign conquests, and no Hindu church militant.

There are Hindu activists, who can at times perhaps be strident in their expression, but we seldom see the type of militancy in Hinduism that has existed in the name of belieforiented religions. According to the Hindu view, it is against Dharma or true religion to invade another country and try to convert it, to impose religious taxes on those of other beliefs, to promote missions that aim at conversion by misrepresenting other religions, or to denigrate the cultures of other people. Naturally, there are exceptions to this even among Hindus in this militant age, but they are rare.

Most of what has been called Hindu militancy is a reaction against Islamic or Christian fundamentalism and militancy that has long made India its target. Hindus have been under siege by missionary groups for centuries, with the usage of money, deception and violence to convert them. That Hindus might overreact to such aggression at times may be regrettable but should be put in the proper context. Probably none of the other major religions of the world has responded with such lack of violence to the missionary efforts directed against them.

WHAT IS THE HINDU VIEW OF CONVERSION? There is only one true religion, the universal tradition of truth. The different religions of the world are different formulations or perhaps distortions of that One Truth. Recognizing this universal tradition, Hindus do not see the need to convert people to a particular belief. They recognize the Divine presence that exists already in everyone. If the other is God, what are we going to convert people to and why? What is important is to recognize the internal Divinity in all, not to make other people copy our idea of religion.

There may be different spiritual approaches that are better for different people to follow but this is at best to choose an angle of approach to the One Truth. Such different teachings are not distinct religions but alternative formulations of the one religion of truth. Sanatana Dharma recognizes that many such approaches are possible and a diversity of them should be encouraged, but the underlying universality of truth should never be forgotten.

To get people to think that they have a particular religious identity and it should be replaced with another, is to confuse the Self with the body and is a sign of ignorance. The Divine is our essential nature, our inner being. Actually we donít have any religious identity at all. Our true religious identity or sacred nature is of the Self of all. Hindu Dharma honors this natural, eternal and universal religion of life.

CAN ONE BE CONVERTED TO HINDUISM? As Sanatana Dharma or the eternal tradition, Hinduism holds that we are all born in universal truth. As immortal souls we can never be apart from it. We are inherently part of Sanatana Dharma. Even if we assume a contrary religious identity, we can never really leave it. Can one ever be apart from the Divine whatever oneís religious affiliation may be? Whatever our religious affiliation may be, the laws of the universe do not change for us, nor does our responsibility for our actions.

However, Hindus do share their religion and welcome others to partake of it, not because they are

seeking converts in order to dominate the world, but because they recognize that all human beings are of one family. Such sharing is not trying to save others but striving to connect all human beings to the cosmic being.

One can formally become a Hindu by undergoing a ceremony called *Shuddhi* (purification), a short ritual lasting about two hours. Various Hindu groups provide this service, which may also connect people to a specific Hindu sect or sampradaya. Yet becoming a Hindu does not mean converting to a belief that limits our freedom of inquiry. It does not require accepting a specific prophet, son of God, scripture or church. It gives full freedom to follow whatever leads to the highest reality. One can be a Hindu and still follow truth wherever one finds it. Joining Hindu Dharma in the true sense is an inclusive, not exclusive process. It is a recognition of Sanatana Dharma, which requires respect all dharmic traditions and principles whatever their source. It is not a mere change of label but requires that we begin a life of spiritual practice or sadhana.

SHOULD MEMBERS OF OTHER RELIGIONS BECOME HINDUS?

The true purpose of religion is to know God, which is to know oneís Self. The Hindu tradition as Sanatana Dharma contains the full range of meditation practices leading to Selfrealization, which are not clearly understood in all religious traditions and are entirely absent in a number of them. If one is serious about the real purpose of religion, which is the inner quest, Hindu teachings can be of great importance.

Hinduism, directing us to Self-realization, can be helpful to those of any religious background. It leads to a greater teaching that integrates religion into an inner spiritual view and higher awareness. Hinduism teaches cosmic laws like karma and rebirth that everyone should know. It emphasizes universal ethical practices like non-violence and principles of right living like honoring the sacred nature of all life, which are essential to world peace. It contains a complete science of Yoga, including postures, breathing practices, mantra and meditation, which all people need to understand their true nature.

Mystics of many types subscribe to views and practices similar to Hinduism, including rebirth, mantra, Yoga and meditation, even though the more orthodox in the religions around them may not these. The advantage of Hindu Dharma is that it is a religion which does not have a gulf between the mystics and the orthodox and which provides spiritual practices for people at all levels of development. In this regard, if one wants to follow a religion, Hinduism has a great deal to offer.

CAN IT BENEFIT A HINDU TO JOIN OTHER RELIGIONS?

A true Hindu recognizes the portion of universal truth that is manifest in all religions. Great teachings and good values can be found among individuals of all backgrounds which should be honored. However, this does not require formally joining a particular church, particularly those which promote exclusive beliefs and divide humanity into hostile camps.

A true Hindu can never take upon one religious identity as opposed to another, just as one cannot leave the universe in which one lives. Hinduism recognizes the truth of religion as such and attempts to maintain that in an open tradition. It says that we should recognize all religions as different approaches to the universal religion, which honors the sacred nature and immortality of all beings. Usually it is a spiritual loss if a Hindu joins another religion because they are leaving a tradition that emphasizes spiritual practices leading to Self-realization for one that considers mere belief to be enough.

MUST ONE BE BORN A HINDU? Some people believe that a person must be born a Hindu in order to be a Hindu, that there is no way for western or other non-Hindus by birth to become Hindus. A clear examination of how Hinduism has spread in time and space shows this not to be true.

Hindus include all the peoples of the subcontinent of India, including the Nepalese and Assamese, who are of the TibetoBurman group of peoples. Hinduism was long dominant in Indonesia and Indo-china among the various groups living there. Clearly Hinduism could not have spread so far if it was restricted to those born as Hindus.

There are some Hindu sects that may limit themselves to those born from a Hindu background, but even among these assimilation by marriage is usually allowed. And there are a number of Hindu sects like Arya Samaj, Vishva Hindu Parishad or Hinduism Today that do actively bring people into the Hindu fold.

SHOULD ONE FOLLOW ONEíS RELIGION OF BIRTH? We are born into many things, some which may reflect our real nature; others which may be obstacles that we should strive to overcome. The religion of our birth may be a help or a hindrance to our inner being, depending both upon what it is and how we apply it.

Religion, properly understood, should be an aid to Selfrealization and not an end-in-itself. One should follow whatever religious teachings most aid in this realization, regardless of their origin. If the religion one is born into has a living Self-realization tradition that one can follow, one should certainly adapt it. If the religion of oneís birth does not have such a tradition, then one should look to teachings that do. We must learn to use religion to further our inner understanding and cease letting religion use us to further the vested interests, usually of a worldly nature, that sustain it. We do not belong to any particular religion; rather all religions belong to us.

In the global age that is dawning, we no longer are restricted to the culture or religion of our area of birth but have access to that of all humanity. We should strive to benefit from the spiritual legacy of the human race, just as we are learning to benefit from the scientific knowledge and culture of all areas of the world.

IS HINDUISM A CULT?

Cults are temporary religious movements in which some charismatic leader uses religion for mere personal benefit. Cults are usually centered on one person and isolate people from ordinary functioning in society.

A religion like Hinduism that has existed for thousands of years is not centered on any particular personality, and has produced many great people in all walks of life, is not a cult. There are Hindus who are successful in all fields both in the East and the West as scientists, doctors, lawyers, artists and so on. In fact, Hindus in America have a much higher standard of education and income than the average American.

Unfortunately, according to religious fundamentalists, any different or foreign religious group is a cult. Such people are caught in religious prejudice, which they reflect in their condemnation of different religious approaches. They do not recognize any universal truth or have any tradition of Yoga and meditation, which inner practices they also regard as cults.

From the Vedantic point of view, any teaching which states that God is outside of ourselves is a cult because it confuses our internal reality, which is pure consciousness, with something external. Actually, whatever religion asserts a separate identity for itself apart from universal truth to that extent becomes a cult. Whatever limits truth, which is infinite and eternal, to a particular manifestation is a cult or false presentation of reality.

WHY DO CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS SEEK TO CONVERT HINDUS?

Over the centuries, Christians and Muslims have sent out not only missionaries but also armies to convert Hindus. Today they are probably spending more money than at any point in history to achieve this aim. Obviously one does not seek to convert someone whose views one respects. Clearly such

Christians and Muslims do not appreciate Hinduism, Sanatana Dharma, its many saints, sages, yogic practices or spiritual philosophies. If they appreciated such higher knowledge, they would be coming to Hindu gurus to learn or to share, as many westerners have, not to preach or condemn.

This conversion-promoting mentality reflects an outward view of religion, in which religion becomes a social and political institution whose main goal is to increase in numbers. It inhibits the internal dimension of religion or the spiritual quest, which it is often opposed to, and which the very groups that it seeks to convert usually know more about than the missionaries themselves. Such missionaries are to be pitied. Though they may have idealism and passion, much like politicians, they have not understood the real purpose of religion, which is not to get other people to follow a belief but to awaken the Divine Self in all. They need to be taught that the true sharing spirit in religion is not the missionary spirit of conversion but the yogic spirit of self-purification.

HOW CAN HINDUS COEXIST WITH OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS?

Hindus have throughout the centuries not only coexisted but provided a refuge for many other religious groups including Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Bahais. *The real question is whether non-Hindus can coexist with Hindus.* Hindus still endure great efforts to convert them. While Hindus have generally respected other religions, other religions have seldom respected them in return, and rarely take any action to counter wrong ideas about what Hinduism really is. This is particularly sad because Hinduism contains the deeper spiritual teachings that the world desperately needs.

Religion should first teach us coexistence, live and let live, honoring a diversity of spiritual paths. Otherwise religion is not fulfilling its purpose of uniting us with the Divine but consigning us to human prejudice.

Questions 4 Towards an Awakened Hinduism and Resurgent Sanatana Dharma

There are many people who do not want to see Hindus maintain their own traditions or expand their influence in the world. This section addresses the issues of resurgent Hinduism and how to make Sanatana Dharma both an outer and an inner inspiration for all people.

Can One Be a Hindu in the Modern World?

If we rephrase this question in terms of Sanatana Dharma, it is easy to answer. Can one follow a universal tradition in the modern world? Obviously, we must develop a universal view in order to be truly global in outlook. To be a Hindu in the true sense of the word is to be ahead of the times and behind all times.

Sanatana Dharma, not being limited to a point in time or space, can be adapted to any time, place or person. As a perpetual or perennial tradition, it demands names and forms appropriate to changing circumstances. Yet to follow the eternal tradition is not to be superficially modern ó a creature of the moment, pursuing the latest social trend ó but to live at the heart of creation.

To be modern today, one is inclined to abandon religion and embrace the popular culture of entertainment, sensation and physical culture, or to take up modern intellectual culture, or modern politics which shuns religion. This fails to answer the deeper purpose of life. The ultimate issue is not to be in harmony with the times but to discover what transcends time. Then we become citizens of the universe and of all time, not just creatures of one age or another.

SHOULD HINDUS BE PROUD OF THEIR TRADITION? Hindus should be proud of their spiritual tradition, which is the oldest and most comprehensive in the world. They should be proud of the many great sages and yogis it has consistently produced through the centuries, in both periods of material abundance and those of poverty and foreign domination. Hindus should be proud of their great modern teachers who show that the experience of God is not the birthright of every human being. What other religion of this century has produced such figures as Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo, Paramahansa Ramakrishna, Anandamayi Ma, Ammachi, and Paramahansa Yogananda to name but a few?

Above all, Hindus should be proud of Hinduismís basis in Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition and its refusal to cast itself into the mold of exclusive, particularized, and divisive religious identities. But to do this Hindus must also manifest the universality of their tradition by how they live and by sharing it with the world at large.

IS IT NOT ARROGANT TO BE PROUD ABOUT ONEíS RELIGION?

The pride of the ego, which is separative, is always divisive, as it insists that only its point of view is correct. Yet the soul or our inner being has another pride, which is a recognition of the value of spiritual reality over material appearances.

One should be proud in a spiritual sense about the universal element in oneself and in oneís Dharma. We are the Divine itself in manifestation. All time and space is but our shadow. The mentality of a slave or a sinner does not suit our infinite Being. The soul should be proud of the eternal truth of its nature which states that ìI am the entire universe.î We need not bow down to any religious belief system or external religious authority. We need only recognize the Divine presence within ourselves. This is Sanatana Dharma, the enduring truth of all that is. Such dignity of our true nature can take us beyond all limiting identities.

WHY ARE HINDUS APOLOGETIC ABOUT BEING HINDUS?

As the formulation of a universal tradition, Hinduism is not an aggressive system. It encourages humility and respect for all people. It promotes itself through peace and love, not through preaching

and condemnation. In the modern world, which has little of spirituality in it, many Hindus find that their tradition appears out of place. This has caused them to feel apologetic about their practices as part of their attempts to accommodate others. Yet most importantly, Hindus have had to deal with much missionary and Marxist propaganda against their religion and so feel defensive and donít know how to communicate to outsiders what Hinduism really is.

To counter this apologetic presentation, Hindus need to learn the essence of Santana Dharma and share it with others. Only Hindus who donít understand the real meaning of their tradition as Sanatana Dharma and the centrality of its yogic approaches to world spirituality can be dominated by negative views of who they are. In fact Hinduism, through Vedanta or the science of Self-realization, is the teaching of lion-hearted souls. It is for the fearless and independent, for those who are willing to transcend the external view of reality.

Yet not all Hindus are apologetic about being Hindus. The apologetic Hindu may soon be a thing of the past, as the great value of Yoga, Vedanta, Ayurveda, Vedic knowledge and Sanatana Dharma spreads throughout the world. The main thing is for Hindus to share their religion with others so that all can benefit from its deep wisdom and profound practices.

SHOULD HINDUS BE MORE AGGRESSIVE? Hindus suffer from passivity and disunity. These are probably their main enemies. Hindus are not strong in asserting themselves; they are generally hesitant, if they assert themselves at all. A more positive, expansive self-confident spirit in their religion is essential, both for their own personal practice and the collective well-being.

This does not require that Hindus become violent, but it does require that they wake up and become active. Perhaps in this process some Hindus may become temporarily over assertive but even this may be better than remaining overly passive. The present crisis in the world today, and in India, demands action both inwardly and outwardly. Let all souls rise to the occasion and bring the light of truth and Self-realization into the world from whatever angle they can. It is important to promote Dharma in both our outer and inner lives. Without bringing Sanatana Dharma back into the world, our society will continue to drift in confusion.

WHAT IS HINDU ACTIVISM?

Hindu activism is the work of Hindu groups and individuals to promote Santana Dharma globally, particularly to remove distortions of Hinduism and denigrations about Hindus that are still common in the world today. Given all the other forms of activism going on, it is important that Hindus also develop a social presence to preserve their culture, values, traditions and deep spiritual knowledge relative to other traditions and trends of a contrary nature. If a culture cannot stand up for itself in the global arena today, it is likely to be misrepresented or become the target of disinformation by other groups seeking power and control.

In addition, Hindu activism should stand up for all of humanityís experiential spiritual traditions, especially native traditions which lack the resources to defend themselves. It should stand up for the Earth, the plants and animals, and the sacred value of all nature. Hindu Dharma promotes a way of life based upon higher consciousness, not simply human beliefs and ideologies. It is not against material or scientific progress but holds that these should not occur at the expense of other creatures, our environment or our inner development of awareness.

Such Hindu activism is of great importance to bring a dharmic energy into the world. Unfortunately, much of what is called social activism today is a mask to promote the same old missionary, colonial, Marxist, commercial and materialistic agendas that have been trying to destroy traditional cultures for centuries. An alternative to this is crucial.

HOW DOES HINDU ACTIVISM VIEW THE PROBLEMS WITHIN HINDUISM AND INDIAN

SOCIETY?

The Hindu religion in general and the society of India have problems, limitations, difficulties and divisions that need to be addressed. Any Hindu activism must face these challenges as well. Hindus need to take these problems seriously and work out long term solutions for them.

However, all these problems within Hinduism can be addressed and solved within the field of Sanatana Dharma itself. Unfortunately, groups inimical to Hinduism, try to use the problems within Hinduism to divide and convert Hindus, not to actually solve the problems.

Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma contains numerous teachings and a great deal of adaptability so that it can bring all of society, not only Hindu but globally, back to a condition of harmony with the entire universe. Hinduism cannot only improve the status of human rights in the world but the rights of all creatures. Santana Dharma teaches us that the basis of life is not individual rights but universal duties, not only to others but also to our own soul or inner being. If we honor our duties to others and to all of existence, we can go beyond all our human problems, whatever country or religion they may occur in.

ISNíT IT NECESSARY FOR INDIA TO GET RID OF HINDUISM IN ORDER TO SOLVE ITS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS?

India has been largely Hindu throughout its history and its economic problems are only of the last few centuries. These have largely been the product of foreign rule up to the independence of the country and then by the socialist economic policies that modern India followed up to recent times. Indiaís economic problems have not occurred because of the religion of the people. India is now developing economically, not by giving up Hinduism, but by adopting sound economic policies.

Note that people are not asking poor Christian countries, of which there are still many in South America and Africa, to give up Christianity in order to get rid of their poverty. Nor did Japan become an economic superpower by giving up its religion and becoming Christian. For economic development in Europe, people did not advocate a change of religion either but better economic policies. The same is with social problems. The West did not remove slavery by getting rid of Christianity, though many Christian groups had sanctioned it. India can solve its own problems without a change of religion. Similarly, Hindus can solve any social or economic problems they may have through Hindu Dharma itself. In fact, Hindu Dharma contains the yogic and meditative insight that can solve all human problems and unite us with our eternal essence beyond all sorrow.

DOESNíT SUCH ACTIVISM RISK MAKING HINDUS VIOLENT?

There are forms of activism among all religious and political groups in the world, including groups that follow views and beliefs much more aggressive and historically violent than Hinduism. No one is telling these other religious groups to avoid activism because it might make them more violent. Of course, there is always the danger that activists can get caught in anger and possible violence, but that is not used to discredit activism as a whole. Hindu activists will face the same challenges.

From the perspective of Sanatana Dharma, any social activism should be rooted in dharma, which means promoting universal values and a way of life that honors the sacred nature of all existence. Outer activism should not be exclusive of inner spiritual practices or ëinner activismí, but an expression of it. Even those working for the uplift of society should still take time for worship, mantra, and meditation.

A real Hindu activism will help reduce the amount of violence going on in the world. It will address the root causes of violence in religious exclusivism, in the exploitation of nature, and the promotion of material and commercial values as the most important goals of life. Hindu activism will encourage us to reconnect with the greater conscious universe and make our lives into a development

of higher awareness.

SHOULD HINDUS CREATE MISSIONARY MOVEMENTS?

This would probably be better than for Hindus to idly sit by while less spiritual ideologies spread, with little scrutiny, all over the world and in India itself. Yet Hindus need not try to remake Hinduism according to the exclusivism and intolerance of missionary beliefs. These groups may have better succeeded socially for a time but they have not succeeded in the spiritual quest which is what is of ultimate importance.

Hindus should create educational movements all over the world promoting Yoga, Vedanta, Ayurveda, Vedic astrology, Sanskrit, Indian music and all aspects of the greater culture of Sanatana Dharma. They should set up teaching centers, schools and universities, retreat centers, and service organizations. While maintaining the diversity of Hinduism, Hindu groups should support one another and also work with any group that accepts dharmic principles and is willing to live according to them. It is not just a question of promoting one name or label or another but of developing a higher consciousness in the world.

SHOULD HINDUS BE MORE POLITICAL? Hindus have been the least politically minded of all the religious groups in the world, whether as a majority in India or as minorities in other countries. The fact is that we live in a political world and votes do count and determine government policies. There remains a great deal of prejudice and discrimination against Hindus at political, media and academic levels in many places in the world. Several major western countries do not even recognize Hinduism as real or valid religion. Yet Hindus seldom take action at a political level to address the inequities against them. They hope that such negative attitudes will magically disappear, which does not happen.

Hindus are not at all alone in being the victims of discrimination. Members of many racial and religious groups have been victims of the same type of oppression and denigration. But most of these have taken action and corrected these problems. Hindus cannot expect the distortions against them to be removed unless they also take action at a political and social level. In this regard, Hindus can follow politically the same type of strategies that other minorities have followed in the West to gain recognition.

There are several good examples of Hindu activism already. Hindu groups have successfully protested against how Hindu images have been denigrated for commercial purposes, like the use of Hindu deity pictures on shoes or even on toilet seats that several western companies have used. Their protests have removed such offensive displays.

Hindus should be aware of the political nature of the world in which we live and use the same type of political skills that other groups have mastered. Otherwise Hindus are bound to find themselves at a disadvantage, and much of the blame will rest upon their own shoulders. One must use the tools of the times in order to prosper, and today these involve the media, the internet and global communication.

HOW SHOULD HINDUS HANDLE ACADEMIC DISTORTIONS OF HINDU DHARMA?

Hindus are the least active of religious groups in monitoring the academic presentation of their religion and protesting against it when it is wrong, distorted or prejudicial. A few Hindu groups are making efforts in this direction, so the situation is beginning to change but much more work needs to be done.

Compare this to Islam that has spent tens of millions of dollars promoting a positive view of Islam in American education. We donít see the kind of negative presentations of Islam in American academia that we find about Hinduism, in spite of Islamic terrorist attacks like 9/11, because the greater effort that Muslims have made to correct them, even though such negative views of Muslims

were common in the media until a few years ago.

One of the reasons why Hindu study departments in the world have few Hindus teaching in them is that Hindus rarely choose to go into these fields. Hindu groups should make sure that at least some of their members go into academia and work to correct such distortions from within academia itself from which these arise.

Hindu religious departments and India study classes worldwide are now becoming dependent upon funding from Hindu and India communities. Hindus should not provide funding for academic studies departments that are negative about Hindu Dharma. This will also have a great impact over time.

Finally, Hindus need to fund Hindu institutions, schools and training centers of their own that produce good teachers, priests and acharyas. All the other religions of the world have their own institutions and do not simply rely upon academia to train people in their religion. New Hindu and dharmic institutions should come up as well, including Vedic schools that promote all the Vedic arts, sciences and spiritual practices. For this purpose, a new generation of Hindu teachers is necessary.

SHOULD HINDUS BE CRITICAL OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM?

Hindus have to face ongoing Christian and Islamic efforts to convert them, which are still quite extensive and well-funded. Christian and Islamic groups have projected much criticism of Hinduism, most of it inaccurate. It is only proper that they hear a Hindu critique of their beliefs in response. This is not a matter of being critical but of maintaining fairness and upholding the cause of truth.

Most Christian and Islamic groups do not recognize Hinduism as a valid religion. While there is some mutual acceptance of Biblical-based religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), there is a reluctance to accept religions outside this field. Most Christian and Muslim religious leaders criticize or reject Hindu-based Yoga and meditation practices. They do not accept God-realization or Self-realization at doctrinal level and consider it to be arrogance or delusion. Most regard Hindus as condemned to damnation regardless of what they do or how they live.

These are not mere incidental differences or varying opinions but connected to broader missionary agendas to eliminate Hindu dharma altogether. Hindus cannot sit quietly and let these distortions go without a response. That would be self-betrayal and cowardice, not real tolerance. As long as Christians and Muslims continue such anti-Hindu activities, they should expect a Hindu response. Would they not do the same? Such a response is not simply to protect Hindu Dharma but to promote the real truth and proper role of religion.

HOW CAN HINDUS BETTER PROMOTE THEIR RELIGION IN NON-HINDU COUNTRIES?

Hindus must make known who they are and what they really believe, so negative stereotypes about their religion ó which breed misunderstanding and intolerance ó are countered. They must organize themselves not as a dogma but as a community with the common interest to promote a deeper spiritual knowledge in the world.

Hindus must recognize the value of the Hindu religion for the entire world and its great treasures of spiritual and yogic knowledge that are very rare, and sometimes almost unknown in other religions. They must teach Hinduism, particularly Yoga and Vedanta, to non-Hindus, whether such people want to become Hindus or not. Like the ancient Vedic sages said, they should seek to make the entire world dharmic. They must become expansive, open-hearted, fearless, creative and compassionate, not in mere allegiance to a belief but out of contact with the Divine Self within that is greater than the entire world.

HOW SHOULD HINDU CHILDREN BE RAISED? To raise true Hindu children means following Sanatana Dharma in the home and in the family. It means living in the Dharma and having a

culture of the Dharma, which includes communities that maintain living traditions of ritual, Yoga and meditation.

Children are very impressionable about their environment. They want to be accepted and to be part of the society in which they function. They are most affected by sensation and their minds can easily be disturbed by wrong impressions. For this reason, children must be provided a field of learning in which they can flower spiritually. This requires the right atmosphere at home and the right relationship between the parents. The parents themselves must have an active interest in Sanatana Dharma and pass it to their children. They cannot expect of their children what they themselves do not do.

On top of the proper family life, the right educational system must be created; or at least religious camps for children should be developed that immerse them in a higher form of life. Children must be brought into contact with real examples of the spiritual life, great gurus and teachers, so that they have a higher ideal to follow. They must be brought into the world of nature so as to learn how to contact the immanent divinity around them. Without creating the proper environment and the right examples, it will not be possible to get our children to become spiritual, just as a plant will not grow without the proper water and light.

Hinduism contains many stories that are helpful for teaching children, especially the *Ramayana*. Hindu children should be exposed to this literature, which can be quite entertaining, so that the seeds of spirituality can be planted in them. There are many child forms of the Divine like Krishna as a child that they can be taught to emulate. Hindus should honor each child as a living Krishna.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF HINDU DHARMA FOR THE YOUTH?

The young people of the world possess an inherent idealism and urge to shape the future in positive direction. Hindu Dharma, as a tradition that is rooted in the Cosmic Mind, also has a futuristic vision, connecting us to all time and space and beyond. Young people are not just interested in a religious belief; they are interested in spiritual practices. These include ritual, prayer, mantra, Yoga and meditation, so that they can experience the truth for themselves. They are looking to develop a higher state of awareness and contact their own true Self, not merely to follow others or believe what others may have said. They are looking not just for an outer freedom to pursue material commodities but an inner freedom to find happiness in all that they do.

Hindu Dharma provides a rich culture for the youth that includes music, dance and art as part of a yogic vision. It shows us how to work with the secret powers of nature and the hidden potentials our own psyche, including an ecological view of life, a planetary vision, and Yoga and meditation paths for all. Hindu Dharma can fill the need for spiritual experience that young people have, which neither belief oriented religions nor scientific thought can provide.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF HINDU DHARMA FOR THE ELDERLY?

We live in a society in which the population is rapidly aging. Yet our values and prime activities are those of youth, if not adolescence. This leaves the elderly with little to do except try to be younger than their age, which ends up causing depression.

Hindu Dharma teaches us that the spiritual stage life, the period when our inner quest for Divinity becomes the strongest, does not really begin in a primary way until the age of fifty years. Of course, younger people can and should seek to develop a higher awareness beyond the outer desires of life. And rare individuals will seek that from birth.

This means that aging is not a matter for worry and depression for Hindus as it is for most people today. It is a time for our inner being to come forth. It is a time of spiritual growth, expression, joy and ecstasy. Hindu Dharma provides a wealth of yogic teachings and practices for this culminating

phase of life. Its philosophies, mantras and meditations provide a depth of thought and wisdom for us to cultivate. If one wants to age with dignity and to mature as a spiritual being, developing a higher awareness that can transcend death, then one should look into the teachings of Sanatana Dharma. The eternal tradition carries us through and beyond all time.

IS YOURS NOT AN UNREALISTIC VIEW OF HINDUISM?

Very well, one could say, your view of Hinduism is universal, futuristic and beneficial for all to consider, but does the actual Hindu really think this way? Is not the average Hindu trapped in superstition and social backwardness? Are you not covering over this fact with a fantasy view of Hinduism?

The average Hindu may not be aware of the vastness of his or her own tradition. The person may not see beyond the particular sect he or she may belong to. But this is not to deny the underlying teaching. How many westerners are aware of the beauty and profundity of European intellectual culture? Does this make Mozart or Shakespeare less important? How many of us today understand the formulas of modern physics? Does this mean that atomic power or computers donít work for us?

There is always a gap between a spiritual teaching and its social application because our planet is not very spiritually evolved. What is necessary is to raise people up to higher teachings, not to reject higher teachings for ordinary pursuits that are easier to do. It is not just a question of Hinduism. We all have a tremendous spiritual potential in all of us compared to which the other achievements of humanity ó whether in art, science, business or religion ó are at best adornments.

Let us not demean ourselves. All time and space are but our shadow. If we follow the paths of Yoga and the traditions of meditation we can arrive at the universal Self. The Hindu tradition more clearly teaches that universal Self than does any of the other major religions of the world. Let us honor it for that.

DO YOU THINK HINDUISM IS A SUPERIOR RELIGION?

Hinduism is a religion that recognizes the spiritual needs of all types and levels of people. There are no spiritual practices in any religion, whether it is the most simple nature worship or the most exalted meditational approach, without counterparts in Hinduism. Hinduism is probably the most comprehensive religion in the world. This is because it is not trapped in the seeking of superiority but recognizes the same Divine Being and common human aspiration everywhere.

However, we should seek out the highest truth, which is to know the Self, and this requires going beyond lesser truths. Recognizing the Self as the real goal of religion, Hinduism partakes of the highest truth and does not stop short with secondary goals. That highest truth exists for all who look deeply into who they really are. No group can claim to own it, though only those who have realized it can guide us to it.

Yet should some Hindus regard their religion as superior it need not bother anyone. In fact members of all religions tend to think that. Certainly Hindus have many good reasons to regard their tradition as the best, with their great spiritual and cultural traditions. However, Hinduism teaches us that even if we regard our religion as superior, we should remain open to the views of others and seek to discover truth through developing the higher states of consciousness within us. Any religion should encourage us to work harder at our own connection with the Divine, not to sit smugly by and judge others as unholy merely because they donít think the same way we do.

SHOULD PEOPLE BECOME HINDUS?

It would be of great benefit for the world if more people embraced Hindu Dharma, particularly if it is done with a real understanding of the Hindu tradition. The discovery of Sanatana Dharma, with its universal orientation, is like going home, rediscovering oneís true Self. The greater the number of

people who discover the meaning of Sanatana Dharma and its universal perspective, the less the warring creeds will be able to divide people and the less materialism will lead people astray. Today people are not worried or offended if Hindus become Christians. Why should it bother them if the opposite occurs, particularly if they claim to be open minded or universal in their views?

To become a Hindu in the real sense means recognizing that all the spiritual and religious practices of humanity from the most primitive savage to the most exalted yogis have their place. They should be honored for the genuineness of aspiration behind them, not superficially judged according to their name and form. Such a synthetic view is what we all need today, whether it comes to is through Hinduism or another source.

Why should it bother us if people join a religious tradition as old and as spiritual vast as Hinduism, when it doesnít concern us if people join one exclusive belief or another? The main thing is that we should join a religion or spiritual group as a means of finding the truth, the God within, which is our real Self. Otherwise whatever we join is only an illusion. The beauty of becoming a Hindu is that it provides many approaches to Self-knowledge and God-realization.

ARE YOU A HINDU?

I have studied various teachings originating in the Hindu tradition for over thirty years including Yoga, Vedanta, the Vedas, Ayurveda, and Vedic astrology and found immense benefit in all of them. I have also practiced these teachings and made them the basis of my spiritual life. Hinduism was something I discovered in myself through the pattern of my deeper aspirations and my search into the nature of consciousness. It was never imposed upon me from the outside. I did not become a Hindu so much as discover that I already was one, not as a sectarian belief but as an organic connection to the Cosmic Being.

I am happy to belong to this ancient and unending tradition of spiritual knowledge, whose impressions upon the soul cannot be removed even by death. Hinduism has a rich field of knowledge and culture, like the lap of the Divine Mother, in which the soul can freely unfold its infinite capacities. To enter into this teaching is a great blessing to all.

Yet becoming a Hindu is not a matter of taking on some divisive identity. It means recognizing Sanatana Dharma or the universal tradition. It does mean limiting oneself to one church or another but recognizing the universal religion that comes from the Self of all. It means to embrace all human aspiration towards the eternal, but centered on a path of Selfrealization, not merely vaguely accepting everything as good.

However, I am sad that many Hindus have little real appreciation or understanding of their own tradition. To me it is a sign of ignorance to abandon such a profound spiritual system for modern political ideologies, like socialism and communism, to pursue material affluence, or to spiritually cripple oneself by following regressive religions traditions that are usually devoid of any real way for developing higher consciousness. Expressing the value of Hinduism as a westerner, I hope I can get modern Hindus to reexamine their roots.

WHAT IS THE NEED OF OUR TIMES? What India and the world needs is a vibrant, self-confident and bold Hinduism, deeply spiritual, powerfully creative, and dynamically working for global peace and understanding, yet along with a discrimination of higher values, principles and practices, not out of weakness, compromise and passivity. Such a resurgent Hinduism will be at the forefront of scientific and economic development but not at the cost of the greater well-being of society or of the planet.

In addition to a resurgent Hinduism, we need a planetary awakening of Sanatana Dharma through all native and dharmic traditions, including those of ancient Europe and the ancient Middle East, as

well as through all aware individuals, groups and associations of whatever inclination, orientation or aspiration.
May that Eternal Dharma arise again and reclaim its role in both the spiritual and social lives of all people!

Part III

APPENDICES

The Great Refuge

By Ram Swarup

1. I offer my obeisance to Sanatana Dharma of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas*, the *Epics* and the many *Agamas*.

2. I take refuge in this Dharma which has been nourished from generation to generation by great sages and teachers.

3. I take refuge in Sanatana Dharma, whose precepts and practices are pure, which is auspicious in the beginning, auspicious in the middle, and auspicious in the end; whose roots are deep, whose fruits are sweet.

4. I take refuge in Sanatana Dharma whose teaching is pure, whose desires, aspirations and works are pure.

5. I pay my obeisance to Sanatana Dharma which gives us a vision of a higher life, great and immortal life, a life renewed by a higher truth, a life which goes beyond its present limitations.

6. May I be a sharer in its Truth! May I be a worthy sharer in its heritage! May it be given to me to serve this Dharma with all my heart and mind.

7. God grant me that I make its truths my own. Make me a participant in its Truth. May I become worthy of it. Expand and deepen me. Take the veil off from Thy face and Thy inner Truth.

8. I pay my obeisance to Sanatana Dharma that teaches the oneness of human beings and Gods, the oneness of all life. May I be one with the Gods! May I be one with our ancestors! May I be one with those who have gone before me! May I be one with those who have yet to come. May I serve those who are immediately around me, and also those who are hidden from my sight. May I serve all beings on all planes of existence!

9. I pay obeisance to Sanatana Dharma which has the power to heal and reconcile, power to awaken and to reform. May this Dharma restore my people and my country! May it bless all humanity and all beings! May all be auspicious toward each other.

10. Sanatana Dharma protects those who protect it. Therefore protect and serve it in order to deserve and claim its protection.

11. Sanatana Dharma is as wide and profound as its subject. Like its Gods, it has a thousand names and facts, but only some of them have been indicated here.

The Code of Sanatana Dharma

To strive to do the following with sincerity, commitment and dedication:

A. TO RECOGNIZE THE SEVEN COSMIC PRINCIPLES

THE SUPREME SELF PARAMATMAN To see the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self.

To see the entire universe in the Self and the Self in the entire universe. To see God as the Self and the Self as God.

REALITY/THE GODHEAD ñ Para Brahman To respect the Divine or Truth as the true reality both within and outside all appearances, as Being-Consciousness-Bliss, Sacchidananda, underlying all the names and forms of the universe.

GOD, DIVINE FATHER/DIVINE MOTHER ñ ISHVARA/ ISHVARI

To honor the Divine ruler of the universe in both masculine and feminine qualities as creator (Brahma-Sarasvati), preserver (Vishnu-Lakshmi) and destroyer (Shiva-Kali). To honor His/Her reality on all levels from the deities of nature to the Supreme Lord and Lady of the universe (Maheshvara/ Maheshvari).

NATURE ñ Prakriti/Shakti

To honor all Nature as the manifestation of the Divine, as the body of the Cosmic Person (Paramatman) who is pure consciousness. To see in Nature the mirror of the Divine Self. This includes honoring the Devatas (deities) functioning through Nature, including the different nature spirits.

COSMIC INTELLIGENCE ñ MAHAT To observe and respect the workings of cosmic intelligence (Mahat) as the main guiding and directing power functioning within the universe. To become citizens of the universe, not partisans of a particular country or cause.

THE LAW OF KARMA/ CAUSE AND EFFECT To observe and respect the law of karma and rebirth, contemplating the effects of our actions for future lives. This includes offering up the fruits of our actions and doing our duty for the good of all.

THE SUPPORT OF DHARMA/ NATURAL LAW To recognize the truth principles (dharmas) underlying the universe. To honor and foster the dharma (nature) of others, through respecting their individuality. To follow oneís own true nature (svadharma), which requires spiritual practices according to oneís temperament.

B. TO FOLLOW THE TEN GREAT OBSERVANCES TRUTHFULNESS ñ Satya

To always tell the truth, even if it does not make one popular, but to do so in an agreeable and friendly manner.

NON-VIOLENCE ñ Ahimsa

To respect all life as sacred and to practice non-violence in thought, word and deed, not only relative to people but to animals, plants and the entire world of Nature.

CONTROL OF SEXUAL ENERGY ñ Brahmacharya To control oneís sexual energy and not waste it unnecessarily or in a self-indulgent manner. To direct some portion of it for yogic practices.

NON-STEALING ñ Asteya

Not to take or to appropriate for oneself something which has not rightfully been given or accrued as the result of oneís own efforts.

NON-ATTACHMENT ñ Aparigraha Not to cling to any material thing or outward status, or to surround oneself with possessions and property so as to glorify oneself.

CLEANLINESS ñ Saucha

To practice purity and cleanliness in body, speech and mind.

CONTENTMENT ñ Santosha

To remain content whatever circumstances may bring us, good or bad fortune, flattery or insult. To always maintain a happy, cheerful and helpful attitude.

SELF-CONTROL ñ Tapas

To strive to control oneís physical, sensory and mental impulses according to the Divine presence

within. To exercise patience and fortitude in all that one does, acting out of peace of mind.
SELF-STUDY ñ Svadhyaya
To regularly observe and study oneself and spiritual teachings that provide Self-knowledge.

SURRENDER TO THE DIVINE ñ Ishvara-Pranidhana To surrender the fruits of all actions to the Divine. To recognize the Divine Will as the only real power in the universe.

C. TO PRACTICE THE FOUR YOGIC PATHS

YOGA OF KNOWLEDGE ñ Jnana Yoga To strive to see the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self through self-inquiry (Atma-vichara) and meditation (Dhyana).

YOGA OF DEVOTION ñ Bhakti Yoga To strive to merge into God inwardly through devotional meditation and love. To surrender to the Will of God and be an instrument of grace.

YOGA OF SERVICE ñ Karma Yoga To work in the world to fulfill the Divine will through teaching, charity, and social service of a selfless nature.

YOGA OF TECHNIQUE ñ Raja Yoga To practice various yogic methods like asana, pranayama, mantra and meditation for purification of body and mind and for realization of Truth.

D. ADDITIONAL PRACTICES AND OBSERVANCES

RITUAL ñ Puja
To do regular rituals for harmonizing with cosmic intelligence, purification of the mind, and promoting social welfare.

MANTRA
To do regular prayers and mantras for purification of the mind, communion with Divinity, for the welfare of all creatures, and for world peace.

MEDITATION ñ Dhyana
To do regular meditation for the purification of the mind and realization of Truth.

PILGRIMAGE ñ Yatra
To do regular pilgrimages to various sacred sites either as temples or places in Nature.

CHARITY ñ Dana
To be charitable in our actions and to share our possessions with those needing help. To support dharmic activities with our own resources, including temples, schools, and service organizations.

RESPECT FOR PARENTS AND ELDERS To give honor and appropriate help to our parents and elders. To offer prayers and rituals to our ancestors.

RESPECT FOR THE GURU ñ Gurupuja To serve and honor oneís teachers and respect all spiritual guides, which means also to put into practice their teachings.

STUDY OF THE TEACHING
To study the Hindu spiritual tradition and its teachings on a regular basis, including scriptural texts like the *Vedas, Itihasas, Puranas* and *Agamas*, as well as the teachings of our particular guru or lineage.

TRANSMISSION OF THE TEACHING To share Hindu teachings as a valid and universal spiritual path helpful for everyone and pass them on through various forms of instruction. To share whatever we know, particularly with those who are younger than we are.

PROTECTION OF THE EARTH ñ Bhumi Rakshana To protect the Earth, its plants, animals and land formations, and all its resources. To honor the Earth as a manifestation of the Divine Mother.

PURITY IN DIET ñ Shuddhahara

To reduce unnecessary consumption of meat for purposes of purification of the mind, non-violence, and protection of the Earth. This means also to avoid intoxicants, drugs and stimulants. If one resorts to meat or intoxicants, these should be used only in a sacred manner.

MODERATION/ SIMPLICITY
To be moderate in all actions, taking only what is necessary and avoiding excesses. To not make ourselves a burden upon others or upon the Earth.
NON-INTERFERENCE
To not give unsought advice or try to interfere in the lives of others, even if we think that what they are doing is wrong. Not try to impose our views upon others whatever they may think.
UNIVERSALITY ñ Vishvata
To respect all true spiritual and beneficial views and practices, whatever their name and form, whether they have come from within any particular religion or outside of all of them.

This, however, does not mean that one should respect or compromise with unspiritual and harmful practices done under the veil of religion or anything else.

PEACE ñ Shanti
To act out of peace and to promote peace in all that one does. To wish only peace for all beings and creatures.

Outline of Sanatana Dharma

1. Knowledge (*Veda-Vidyå*)
Higher Knowledge (*Paråvidyå*)
Knowledge of the Self (*Åtma Vidyå*)
Knowledge of the Absolute (*Brahma Vidyå*) Knowledge of God or the Creator (*∫shvara-Vidyå*)
Lower Knowledge (*Aparåvidyå*)
Cosmic or World Knowledge (*Prakriti Vidyå*) The Gross World ñ Physical Sciences (*Sthµula Vidyå*) The Subtle World ñ Occult Sciences (*Sµukshma Vidyå*) The Causal World ñ Causal Sciences (*Kårafa Vidyå*)
2. Practice (*Yoga*)
Higher Knowledge (*Paråvidya*)
Four Yogas
Jnana ñ Knowledge
Bhakti ñ Devotion
Karma ñ Service
Kriya ñ Yoga Techniques
Fourfold Kriya Yoga
Raja Yoga ñ Yoga of meditation
Mantra Yoga ñ Yoga of mantra
Laya Yoga ñ Yoga of the sound current
Hatha Yoga ñ Yoga of posture and breath
Lower Knowledge (*Aparåvidyå*), which should be placed in service of the higher
Ritual and Temple Worship (Vedic and Agamic) History and Mythology (*Itihåsa-Purå fa*)
Astrology, Astronomy, and Meteorology (*Jyotisha*) Mathematics and Physical Sciences (*Ga fita*)
Medicine and Psychology (*Åyurveda*)
Language and Grammar (*Sanskrit*)
Literature, Poetry and Drama (*Kåvya*)
Music and Dance (*Gåndharva Veda*)
Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting (*Sthåpatya Veda*) Social Sciences (*Varfåshrama Dharma*)

Law, Politics, Diplomacy (*N∂ti Vidyå, Dharma Shåstras*) Ethics and Morality (*Vinaya*)

Sanskrit Glossary

Agnihotra ñ Vedic fire offerings
Aha≈kåra ñ ego or self-image
Ahi≈så ñ non-violence
Artha ñ pursuit of wealth or prosperity
Årya ñ noble or spiritual
Åsana ñ yogic postures
Åtman ñ the inner Self, pure consciousness
Åtmavidyå ñ Self-knowledge
Atharva Veda ñ most recent of four Vedas, also mantric text *Åyurveda* ñ Vedic medicine
Bhagavad G∂tå ñ scripture of Sri Krishna
Bhakti ñ devotion
Brahmå ñ the Divine in its creative or teaching function *Brahmacharya* ñ control of sexual energy
Brahman ñ God, the Absolute, the Supreme Being, the Uncreate *Bråhmafa* ñ member of the Brahmin class, responsible for religious teaching and the performance of rituals
Buddha ñ the enlightened one, ninth avatar of Vishnu *Buddhi* ñ intelligence, reason
Citta ñ the field of consciousness, the heart
Deva ñ God
Dev∂ ñ Goddess
Dhårafå ñ science of concentration
Dharma ñ natural law, way of truth
Dhyåna ñ science of meditation
Guru ñ teacher, spiritual guide
Homa ñ Vedic fire offerings
∫shvara ñ God as the Creator or cosmic lord
∫shvar∂ ñ God in the feminine as the Creator and cosmic ruler Jainism ñ religion based upon the teachings of Mahåv∂ra and
other Jain *T∂rthaΔkaras*
J¤ana ñ spiritual or Self-knowledge
J¤ån∂ ñ person of spiritual knowledge
Jyotish ñ Vedic astrology
Kåma ñ desire or enjoyment as a goal of life
Karma ñ the law of cause and effect
Krishfa ñ eighth avatar of Lord Vishƒu
Kshatriya ñ member of the noble, warrior or ruling class *KufŒalin∂* ñ serpent power, energy of the higher mind *Lakshm∂* ñ Goddess of beauty, love and prosperity, consort of
Vishƒu
Mahåbhårata ñ great epic of the late Vedic age involving the
story of Krishƒa and the PåƒŒavas
Mahesha ñ name of Shiva
Manas ñ mind, particularly the outer or sense mind *Manava Dharma* ó dharma of human beings
Mantra ñ repetition of spiritual words or sounds

Moksha ñ liberation as the supreme goal of life
Paramåtman ñ the Supreme or Absolute Self
Pårvat∂ ñ Goddess of meditation and transformation, consort of Shiva
Pata¤jali ñ sage who compiled the Yoga Sutras
Prakriti ñ nature, primal matter
Pråƒåyåma ñ yogic breathing practices
Pµujå ñ Hindu rituals consisting of various offerings like flowers to the Divine in its various forms
Puråƒas ñ Hindu scriptures after the Vedic era
Purusha ñ the conscious being
Rådhå ñ consort of Lord Krishƒa
Råma ñ seventh avatar of Lord Vishƒu
Råmåyaƒa ñ story of Råma and his wife S∂tå
Rig Veda ñ oldest Veda and repository of mantra
Sanskrit Glossary
Sacchidånanda ñ Being-Consciousness-Bliss
Såma Veda ñ Veda of sound and chanting
Samådhi ñ spiritual realization
Sanåtana Dharma ñ the universal or eternal tradition of truth *Så≈khya* ñ Hindu system of philosophy founded by Kapila *Sarasvat∂* ñ Goddess of Wisdom
Satya ñ Truth or reality
Shaiva ñ worshipping of the Divine in the form of Shiva *Shåkta* ñ worshipper of the Divine in the form of the Goddess *Shankaråchårya* ñ great Advaitic philosopher and sage of the early medieval period
Shånti ñ peace
Shiva ñ the Divine in its destructive or transformative function *Shµudra* ñ member of the labor class
Tantra ñ medieval Hindu texts of Goddess worship and yoga practice
Umå ñ Divine Mother, form of Pårvat∂
Unaryan ñ a person lacking in spiritual and ethical values *Upanishads* ñ last level of Vedic scriptures relating specifically to Self-realization
Vaishƒava ñ worshipper of the Divine in the form of Vishnu *Vaishya* ñ member of the trading or farming classes *Vastu* ñ Vedic architecture and directional science *Vedas* ñ the Hindu scriptures or source teachings
Vedånta ñ the science and philosophy of Self-realization *Vishƒu* ñ the Divine in its protective and preserving function *Yajur Veda* ñ Veda of ritual
Yoga ñ spiritual practices leading to Self-realization *Yoga Sµutras* ñ classical work on yogic spirituality